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Dr M defers comment on Kuan Yew's gesture

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has deferred comment on Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's move to withdraw his disparaging statement on Johor made in a sworn affidavit, but the state itself is not quite satisfied with the gesture.

Lee last week apologised unreservedly to Malaysia for describing Johor as a place "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings" in the affidavit, but Malaysians, generally, felt that the former Singapore Prime Minister should also retract the statement.

In a signed statement sent out Monday night, Lee said he had asked his counsel to expunge the statement from the affidavit.

Speaking to reporters in Jerantut before leaving for Kuala Lumpur after a two-visit to Pahang yesterday, Dr Mahathir said he was informed of Lee's latest move through a letter sent to him on Monday night.

"We will tell you after the Cabinet meeting tomorrow," said Dr Mahathir when asked if he was happy with Lee's statement.

The Cabinet meets today exactly a week after it demanded that Lee apologise and retract his statement.

Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, however, was not impressed.

"Is this also the stand adopted by Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong?"

"We believe that Malaysians in general and the Johor people in particular want to know the stand taken by Hsien Loong (on this matter)," Abdul Ghani told reporters after opening a seminar on "Malaysia and Canada Working Together in Smart Partnership" in Johor Baru.

Lee and his son, Hsien Loong, are the first and second plaintiffs in the defamation suit against Singapore opposition leader Tang Liang Hong.

Asked whether the positive attitude of the majority of the Singapore people towards Malaysia had eroded, the Menteri Besar said: "This matter began in the 1960s following the separation. It recurred last year and again this year."

Minister of International Trade and Industry Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said it is good that Lee is retracting his statement.

"Nevertheless, the damage has been done. You cannot actually expunge it. So, let it be a lesson," she told reporters at the launching of the Moments Photo Exhibition in Kuala Lumpur.

In Kuala Terengganu, Umno Youth Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi welcomed Lee's latest move and said the movement did not want the issue to be prolonged.

"We hope what happened will serve as a lesson to everyone and the spirit of good neighbourliness should be upheld," he said.

Opposition leader and DAP secretary-general Lim Kit Siang also welcomed Lee's action and said it should put to rest an unpleasant episode in Malaysia-Singapore relations.

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