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LEAD Malaysia-Singapore

DR MAHATHIR CONFIDENT MALAYSIA-SINGAPORE TIES WILL BOUNCE BACK

KUALA LUMPUR, March 27 (Bernama) -- Against the furore in Malaysia sparked off by Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's derogatory remarks of Johor, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today expressed confidence that the two countries will be able to resume normal ties.

Dr Mahathir said he did not see yesterday's Cabinet decision to cool off ties and put off fresh dealings with the island republic as a major problem.

"Naturally between neighbours there will be differences off and on but we have already stated that over time this feeling (of hurt) can be overcome," he said at a news conference at the Japan National Press Club in Tokyo.

Malaysia's relations with Singapore will be back to normal as soon as Malaysians got over their feeling of hurt and bitterness caused by the uncalled for remark, he said.

Of the decision taken at the Cabinet meeting chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in his absence, Dr Mahathir said his Cabinet colleagues must have some good reason.

"I need to talk to them and get an explanation before I can comment further," he said.

Dr Mahathir is on a four-day official visit to Japan accompanied by Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman.

Bilateral relationships between the neighbouring countries nose-dive over the past two weeks. Malaysians were infuriated when Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew called Johor a crime-ridden state "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings."

Lee has since apologised twice but statements by Singapore leaders including Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar on the matter apparently did not go down well with the Malaysian government.

In Singapore, Goh said he needed some time to understand the latest Malaysian Cabinet reaction "before I give further comments."

At the joint press conference with Australian Prime Minister John Howard who is on an official visit to republic, Goh said: "I think I want to take some time to understand their latest reaction before I give further comments."

Pressed further for comments, Goh said he wanted to "absorb the implications of all this before I give further comments."

In Kuala Lumpur, acting Foreign Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha said the Cabinet did not decide on freezing of ties with Singapore.

He said the government was studying the implications of the episode on bilateral ties with Singapore following the statement by Lee on Johor and the Singapore government's reaction over it.

Several Cabinet ministers also spoke on the issue today.

Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said Malaysia had to send a signal to Singapore that it was deeply hurt by the whole episode.

"And it will take time for us to forgive and forget. We have to allow things to take its own cause...I think that is probably best," he said, adding that the Cabinet did not set any time limit as to when bilateral relations would be restored fully.

Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik said Malaysia

had no quarrel with the people of Singapore but was not happy with the attitude of its leaders.

"I think our relation and friendship with the people of Singapore are fine. It's only the attitude of its leaders that we don't like...no problem with the Singaporeans," he said when asked if the Cabinet decision would affect tourist arrivals from Singapore.

He said the behaviour of Singaporean leaders did not reflect any sincerity, referring to Jayakumar's reported surprise at Malaysia when Abdullah announced last week that although the Malaysian government accepted Lee's apology, it would take time to restore relations to the old level because the feelings of Malaysians were hurt.

Jayakumar said Lee's comments were made in his personal capacity and not on behalf of the Singapore government.

Lee's comments on Johor were contained in an affidavit in a defamation suit filed with his son, Hsien Loong, who is Singapore Deputy Premier, against Singapore opposition figure, Tang Liang Hong.

Tang fled to Johor after losing in the republic's general election alleging that death threats had been made against him. In the affidavit, Lee questioned why Tang went to Johor if he need protection when the southern Malaysian state was "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jacking." -- BERNAMA

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