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Dr M: We'll not react to S'pore newspaper report

Kamarul Yunus; Jimmy Yeow

MALAYSIA will not react to a report by a Singapore newspaper supporting Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's disparaging remarks about Johor which strained bilateral ties just over a month ago.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he would not want the strained relations between the two countries to drag on. Malaysia, he added, is "not doing anything".

"I think this is difficult for me to answer. I would not want this matter to drag on. We are not doing anything," he told a press conference in Petaling Jaya last night.

The Straits Times, according to a foreign wire report, said the republic's former prime minister was justified in his criticism of Johor for its crime rate. Lee's remarks, made in an affidavit at a Singapore court, had sparked a fierce row between Malaysia and Singapore.

According to The Straits Times, it had analysed press reports of crime in Johor, to which Singapore opposition politician Tang Liang Hong fled after January general elections saying he had received death threats at home.

Commenting on the report, Dr Mahathir said: "My only regret on this issue is that Tang was blamed for making public (Lee's) affidavit. It was not Tang who exposed it. It was his lawyer."

He added that whether or not Tang had made the affidavit public, it was still the opinion of a Singapore leader.

Dr Mahathir declined to comment, though, when asked if he thought the remarks on Johor were made by Lee deliberately. "That I don't know," he said.

To another question whether The Straits Times' analysis on crime in Johor was made to justify Lee's claim, the Prime Minister said: "That is how you (the press) read it. You are entitled to your opinion.

"A lot of people are entitled to their own opinions. It is up to them how they analyse the report in The Straits Times."

Asked whether the news report will jeopardise efforts in mending ties between the two countries, Dr Mahathir reiterated that it will take time to restore relations between Malaysia and Singapore following Lee's affidavit and the ensuing row.

"It takes a little bit of time to get over our feelings that is already hurt because of this. I will only go that far," he added.

In her comments, International Trade and Industry Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz reminded the Singapore media that they have an important role to play in fostering good neighbourly relations with Malaysia.

"Let's help Malaysia and Singapore, which are neighbours, to be better neighbours," she said in her message to the Singapore media.

Rafidah expressed regret on the report, saying that the newspaper should be answerable if the article it published leads to another fiasco between the two countries.

She said what is clear is that the Government does not want to enter into another quarrel with Singapore following Lee's remark about Johor.

On Monday, the Singapore High Court expunged Lee's remarks on Johor which he described in his affidavit as "notorious for shootings, muggings and car jackings" from his affidavit.

"If newspapers want to assume the role of a bad guy by causing frictions and unnecessary hard feelings, then they have to answer for it should it

deteriorate into another fiasco.

"Malaysia does not want it. We are not in the habit of doing it ...

"We thought the matter has been laid to rest but now the media (Singapore) want to play politics and print such report."

Rafidah challenged the Malaysian newspapers to take up the issue seriously with their Singapore counterparts.

Bernama reports: Other Malaysian leaders blasted The Straits Times for its article to justify Lee's criticism of Johor Baru for its crime rate.

Several ministers interviewed agreed that the report was damaging and had not helped to improve Singapore-Malaysia ties following a diplomatic tiff over Lee's remarks.

The Umno Youth went a step further with a call to Wisma Putra to review the diplomatic ties with the island republic.

Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman said the report was "not a friendly way of managing the issue".

"We also know that there is enough crime being committed in Singapore ... does Singapore like our media to expose the degree of the crime there?"

But when asked if the article had caused damage to efforts to mend ties, Ghani said: "I don't consider this important anymore. I think the Singapore parties are in their own world.

"I don't think we should take them seriously anymore about this particular subject matter."

Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat questioned Singapore's sincerity in its relationship with Malaysia.

"I've been noticing that the Singapore press has been writing a lot of negative reports about Malaysia even after the issue," he said.

Mohamed, who is also from Johor, said The Straits Times' article could be termed as "an unfriendly act". "They still harbour bad feelings about us."

Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak likened the action by the paper as opening up old wounds.

"If the Singapore media could do that, the media in Malaysia could do the same but newspapers here are 'gentlemen' and would not simply do anything to hurt their neighbour."

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