

19 MAR 1997

Kuan Yew (News Analysis)

KL-SINGAPORE ROW ENDS BUT DAMAGE DONE

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, March 19 (Bernama) -- The diplomatic row between Malaysia and Singapore over disparaging remarks about Johor by Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew comes to an end with the Cabinet's decision today to accept his apology but the damage to bilateral relations has been done.

There have been occasional furore between the two neighbours in recent years but none has quite reached the scale seen over the past one week when the Malaysian government and people got worked up over Lee's description of Johor as a place notorious for "shootings, muggings and car-jackings".

What the Singapore government will do to repair the damage is of particular significance -- and perhaps unprecedented too -- with diplomatic relations now being perceived at the lowest ebb, given the fact that just about every Malaysian feels insulted over the remarks.

But this latest furore is also unprecedented on another score -- that Lee has been made to apologise over anything that he said, not once but twice in the one week that the controversy was grabbing headlines in both countries.

The way that the former Singapore Prime Minister apologised "unreservedly" in the first place on Thursday not only failed to satisfy the Malaysian government and people but reading between the lines, many came to the conclusion that it was adding insult to injury.

But it was vintage Lee Kuan Yew.

He not only did not apologise in his own name or sign the statement of apology, but used his Press Secretary to do so.

This only suggested that his Press Secretary was good enough to defuse the intense situation, especially calls from Malaysian leaders and public, including the Prime Minister, that he makes amends for his reckless remarks.

What angered Malaysians most about the Lee Kuan Yew episode is that he appeared unapologetic even in the very apology that he first issued.

He made it clear in the Thursday statement that his remarks on Johor were only meant as a court affidavit and that had he known that it would be discussed in open court, he would not have done so.

How a man of Lee's stature could have expected Malaysians to believe him on this is beyond the comprehension of even an uneducated person.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad very aptly put it: "Although Lee does not know his affidavit is going public, it is something that comes from his heart".

"When we say things and people don't listen, we say nevertheless whatever is entrenched in our hearts".

By saying that Johor is a crime-ridden state, Lee himself actually is also insulting the intelligence of his own Singaporean fellow citizens who travel by the thousands across the Causeway daily to Johor, and feeling more free than in their own country, in the process.

This is because among other things, they can chew gums in Johor and even throw rubbish as they once in a while do.

Also Singaporeans, the biggest investors in Johor, would not have put their money there if Lee was right.

Lee was made to eat humble pie again by coming out with a second apology late on Monday, as well as a promise to apply to the court to retract the offending affidavit.

The comments of a Kuala Lumpur-based Western news agency journalist on

the episode are also worth noting.

Referring to Lee's statement that he had based his opinion about Johor's crime situation on reports he had read in the press and that he had actually not visited Johor since he stepped down as PM in 1990, the journalist asked: "Can you imagine what would be Lee or the Singapore reaction if foreign journalists were to say the same thing about Singapore without the journalists actually having visited Singapore.

"Lee would have sued them or their publication till no end or to make paupers out of them," he added.

Dr Mahathir himself did not think Lee's remarks on Johor were meant to discourage Singaporeans and foreigners from shopping in Johor in order to save Singapore's languishing retail trade.

"His intention was to make millions of dollars through his defamation suit," said the Prime Minister in Johor Baharu last Thursday, referring to Lee's defamation suit against opposition leader Tang Liang Hong, which had caused Lee to come out with the affidavit in the first place.

To the Western news agency journalist, the most "interesting" part of the whole episode is that "Malaysians are the only people in the world who could make Lee Kuan Yew to apologise".

He was referring to Lee's open criticisms in recent years of countries in this region for their perceived failures as well as his disdain towards the press and for taking newspapers, magazines and journalists to court.

On the other hand, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said over the weekend he is working "very hard" to improve ties with Malaysia.

Although he only described Lee in making the remarks as "offside", it is also quite obvious that Goh is concerned over Lee's insensitivity in badmouthing neighbours.

Malaysia-Singapore ties have been placed on "difficult ground" by the Lee Kuan Yew episode, which has forced Dr Mahathir to reveal publicly on Thursday for the first time two other instances when the Singapore government had seemed to be less friendly.

He referred to Malaysia having to give up the Malaysian Naval Base in Woodlands and the pressure from Singapore for Malaysia to give up its railway land in Tanjung Pagar.

Singapore had raised the rent and posed other problems on the naval base.

And although Malaysia retains ownership of the railway land up to 999 years, it is also under pressure to give it up by "various means", the details of which Dr Mahathir did not disclose.

But if there is one man who feels proud for protecting the integrity of Malaysia in the entire episode, it is Abdul Razak Ahmad, the Johor lawyer who acted for Tang, and who first made public Lee's offending affidavit.

"I did it not for personal glory but it is my duty as a Malaysian citizen to protect the integrity of our country against such baseless and scurrilous remarks by Lee Kuan Yew," he told Bernama when contacted today.

"It shows Lee's utter contempt for Johor. I am happy that our leaders and people have acted admirably and in no uncertain terms against this attempt by Lee to smear our good name," he said. -- BERNAMA

AU RM