

14/03/1997

Kuan Yew makes 'unreserved' apology (HL)

MR LEE Kuan Yew has apologised "unreservedly" to Malaysia for stating in a sworn affidavit that Johor was "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings". Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed described the apology last night as "a step towards improving relations".

Wisma Putra confirmed receiving the Singapore Senior Minister's official letter of apology at about 6pm, just hours after Dr Mahathir, who had flown from Kuala Lumpur to Johor Baru in the morning, had said Lee's statement on Johor could jeopardise Malaysia-Singapore relations.

Lee's disparaging statement on Johor was made in an affidavit filed at a Singapore court in January. When reported by the Press on Wednesday, it provoked an angry Malaysian backlash. The Cabinet that morning demanded that Lee apologise and retract his statement.

Yesterday, before the apology came, Umno Youth staged anti-Lee Kuan Yew demonstrations in Johor Baru and Kuala Lumpur and threatened to sue Lee for defamation if he did not apologise. There were calls for the Malaysian Government to review its water pact and other forms of cooperation with Singapore and that Lee be stripped of his Datukship bestowed by the Johor Sultan.

Even the Opposition in the republic demanded an explanation from Lee and the Singapore Straits Times Industrials Index shed more than 23 points to close at 2,154.33 yesterday on, according to analysts, fears of "economic retaliation from Malaysia".

In a seven-paragraph statement issued to the Malaysian Press at around 6.40pm, the press secretary to the Senior Minister said Lee did not mean for the affidavit to be made public, that he had made the statement in a sworn affidavit on January 27 in proceedings against opposition party member Tang Liang Hong for a Mareva injunction to be heard in chambers, not in open court.

Tang is facing 13 defamation suits filed against him by leaders of Singapore's ruling People's Action Party, including Lee.

The statement said because the public was confused over the terms and effect of the Mareva injunction, the parties applied for and the judge ordered open court hearings so that the public would have the facts.

The statement added that Tang had also asked for an open court hearing when he sought to challenge the impartiality of the judge. This meant that the affidavit would be discussed in open court.

"As a result it has now been reported in the Press. This was not anticipated when Mr Lee first applied for the Mareva.

"Had Mr Lee's attention been drawn to this, he would have tried to get his counsel not to have this affidavit taken into open court. He had no intention that his affidavit made in support of court proceedings in chambers should affect the good relations between Malaysia and Singapore," the statement said.

The statement also said Lee has not been to Johor since he stepped down as prime minister of Singapore in 1990 and his perception of the state was "based on reports he had read in the Press".

"The Senior Minister had no intention to cause offence and apologises unreservedly for the offence he has caused to the Government and the people of Malaysia by his statement on Johor in his affidavit," the statement added.

Asked before a dinner at Kota Tinggi, Johor, if he viewed the apology

positively, Dr Mahathir said: "I always view things positively, unless people view me negatively, then I am negative."

Earlier, he said Singapore should not make unfair remarks about Malaysia if it wanted good relations.

He said remarks like Johor being a notorious place and Malaysia not practising meritocracy should not be made because Malaysia too knew that Singapore did not practise meritocracy and in fact certain people there faced discrimination.

Among the things Malaysia was uneasy about were the rise in the rental rates for the Royal Malaysian Navy base in Woodlands and the call for KTM trains to discontinue their services to Tanjung Pagar in Singapore.

"We willingly handed over the Woodlands base to them even though we have the right to own it," Dr Mahathir said.

On the rail service, he said KTM had the right to operate the service to Tanjung Pagar for 99 years but Singapore wanted KTM to stop plying up to Tanjung Pagar.

"Only the Government knew this. We did not talk about it to others but since you asked, I am saying," he said.

The Prime Minister dismissed Lee's contention that Johor was "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings".

"I feel very safe here," he told reporters. "I think you feel safe here. Are you unsafe? You feel unsafe? Did people hijack your car? How many people have shot at you?"

Dr Mahathir said even Singaporeans feel safe when they are in Johor. "Singaporeans invest a lot in Johor. They come here to buy food and everything, so they feel safe here ... they come here. In fact, given half the chance, they will also buy a lot of petrol here.

"So it's quite safe, I think. Quite a lot of Singaporeans think it is safe. That's why they come here."