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LEAD Cabinet-Singapore

MALAYSIA FREEZES FRESH BILATERAL DEALINGS WITH SINGAPORE

KUALA LUMPUR, March 26 (Bernama) -- Malaysia today decided to freeze fresh bilateral dealings with Singapore in the wake of recent developments following Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's derogatory remarks over Johor.

This was decided at the weekly Cabinet meeting chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim today.

A minister who spoke on condition of anonymity said the Cabinet had decided to cool off relations for the time being in terms of bilateral negotiations "or anything that is related to Singapore."

Any existing bilateral negotiations will also be suspended for the time being.

Another minister said government-to-government relations, meetings between the ruling political parties and award of contracts to Singapore companies would also be affected.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is currently on a four-day official visit to Japan. Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is accompanying him.

The same minister said today's Cabinet decision was prompted by the subsequent remarks or reaction from across the Causeway, in particular by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Foreign Minister S.Jayakumar, after the Malaysian government announced that it accepted Lee's unreserved apology for describing Johor as "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings".

Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat said Malaysia did not want to be over enthusiastic in forging cooperation or friendship with Singapore like before as the republic itself did not show its keenness to do so.

He said Singapore should not treat the matter as easily solved by merely an apology from Lee as Malaysia was still disappointed over the matter.

"If one has this feeling of hatred and it is stuck in his mind it is difficult to erase it...the feeling has been imbued and it is not easy to forget even if you can ask for forgiveness many times," he said when met tonight.

"Not easy for Singapore to say okay and let's be friends again...who wants to be friends again...not easy to forget. Today we think it's better to slow down a bit," Mohamed said

Mohamed said the comments by Goh and Jayakumar reflected as if they "were not serious and on the other hand intimidated us".

Abdullah announced after last Wednesday's Cabinet meeting that although the government accepted Lee's apology, it would take time to restore the relationship to the old level.

Radio Corporation of Singapore reported the same day that Jayakumar expressed surprise at the Malaysian government's statement because Lee's remarks on Johor was made by Lee personally in his action against Singapore opposition figure, Tang Liang Hong.

Jayakumar said Lee was suing Tang in his private capacity to defend his personal reputation and to enforce his personal rights.

Lee's remarks on Johor were contained in an affidavit in his defamation suit filed against Tang by him and his son, Hsien Loong, who is also Singapore Deputy Premier.

After making known his apology through his press secretary, Lee later

issued a personal statement in which he repeated his unreserved apology and said he had instructed his lawyer to delete the offending statements from the affidavit.

Yesterday, Goh was reported by Radio Corporation of Singapore as saying relations between Malaysia and Singapore should move on following the Malaysian Cabinet's acceptance of Lee's apology.

Goh blamed differences between the two countries on inaccurate newspaper reports and said the inaccuracies would be resolved in due course.

He also said that even though Singapore would take steps to restore ties, the pace would largely be determined by Malaysia.

Goh even quoted a Malay proverb saying that water could not be separated even by a knife to describe the relationship between Malaysia and Singapore as the interests of both were intertwined.

Goh also said there would be more links between Johor and Singapore and the republic was also keen to act on Malaysia's plans for a bridge to replace the existing Causeway if the Singapore government was approached on an official basis. -- BERNAMA

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