

14/03/1997

No man is an island

MALAYSIA-Singapore relations have not always been smooth sailing despite the fact that many Singaporeans have relatives in Malaysia and some of them were even born in Malaysia. But this does not stop people from having differing views. But as good neighbours every effort needs to be made to ensure that the feelings of the other are not hurt. There is certainly no need to pass disparaging remarks about the other - even if it is within closed doors or in an affidavit which is not meant to be made public. The uneasiness felt by Singaporeans and the recent remarks by the Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew about Johor are unfair to say the least. In apologising "unreservedly" as he "had no intention to cause offence" comes in the wake of angry protests from both sides of the causeway. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad described the apology as a "step towards improving relations". Is the apology sufficient to calm the anger that has been unleashed?

This is not the first time that Lee has passed remarks that have not been too kind about Malaysia. Before the recent general elections in the Republic, the Senior Minister had warned his countrymen that Singapore could be forced to seek a re-merger with Malaysia if the island faltered economically. In fact, Lee's recent remarks adversely affected the stock market in Singapore which shed 23 points to close at 2,154 points yesterday.

Singapore is heavily dependent on Malaysia. The Republic's water supply is from Johor, much of its trade is entrepot trade of goods and services from Malaysia. More than 200,000 Malaysians keep the wheels of Singapore's economy moving. Singaporeans buy property in Johor as well as in other parts of Malaysia. They have large investments in Malaysia and are among the largest foreign investors in Johor. Foreign investors, including those from Singapore, will not put their hard earned money in a place which is unsafe and prone to rampant crime. Singaporeans make more than 10 million trips to Malaysia a year. Singaporeans not only come across the causeway to buy petrol but also do their weekly shopping. Will they be doing this if the place is unsafe as Lee claims? No one denies that crime is prevalent everywhere but the degree and the nature of these crimes differ from place to place.

No one denies the fact that Singapore under the leadership of Lee has developed and made remarkable progress. He deserves full credit for it. He turned an island which had no resources into one of the world's best run cities. Singapore benefits from developments in Malaysia. Increased Malaysian trade flows means greater business for the Republic's ports. But there seems to be some envy, jealousy and indeed fear in Singapore that Malaysia is catching up and perhaps even marching ahead of Singapore.

Almost every move that Malaysia makes to develop is countered by the Republic and viewed as direct competition. The establishment of Labuan as an International Offshore Financial Centre was seen as competing with Singapore. When the Malaysian authorities announced moves to relax foreign listings on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (KLSE) and especially that of infrastructure stocks, Singapore relaxed further its requirements for such listings. When the move was made to split the KLSE from the Singapore Stock Exchange (SES) it was then said that the KLSE would not survive. The truth of the matter is that the SES suffered, the number of listings were drastically reduced overnight when the Malaysian stocks were delisted.

Singapore then introduced CLOB, which is essentially kept alive by Malaysian stocks. Today the KLSE is a much larger and more vibrant market than the SES. But Malaysia's achievements and Singapore's own internal problems are not good enough reasons to pass disparaging remarks about one's neighbour. No man is an island and Lee knows this and it is hoped that the hiccup does not recur and that bilateral relations are not put in jeopardy following the unpleasant episode and the unreserved apology.

(END)