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PM: People must get over the hurt first (HL)

Hardev Kaur in Tokyo

TOKYO, Thurs: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says relations with Singapore will resume "as soon as people get over the feeling of hurt and bitterness caused by an uncalled for remark against Malaysia".

Asked to comment on Wednesday's Cabinet decision to "cool relations" with the republic, Dr Mahathir said: "I would like to know more before I explain or give my reasons why."

Dr Mahathir, who is on an official visit to Japan, said this in reply to a question from a Singapore journalist who wanted to know what action Singapore or its Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew must take before Malaysia would resume normal ties.

The furore was sparked by Lee's comments in an affidavit describing Johor as "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings".

In reply to another question, Dr Mahathir said: "This decision has been made by the Cabinet, which normally meets on Wednesday. If I am not in the country it is of course presided over by my deputy. They must have some reasons for making this decision."

Nevertheless, the Prime Minister said he does not see it "as a major problem".

"Naturally between neighbours there will be differences, off and on. But we have already stated that over time this feeling can be overcome.

"As I have stated before, I need to go back to talk to them (Cabinet) and get an explanation before I can make any comment."

Reports quoting sources and confirmed by some members of the Cabinet late Wednesday said while normal relations will be maintained, no special effort will be made to deepen contacts.

Last week, the Cabinet had accepted Lee's apology but stressed that it would take time to restore the relationship to the old level. Lee's apology was made through his press secretary which was followed by the release of 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.

The "offending remarks" were made in an affidavit filed by Lee and his son Brig Gen Lee Hsien Loong, who is also Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister in a defamation suit against Singapore opposition figure Tang Liang Hong.

Wednesday's Cabinet decision was reported by the Japanese press, BBC World Service and CNN.

In Kuala Lumpur, ministers gave varying accounts of the Cabinet decision.

Acting Foreign Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar said the reports were "not quite accurate".

"What was meant is that the Government is studying the implications of the episode on bilateral ties with Singapore following the statement (by Lee) on Johor and the reaction of the Singapore Government over his statement," the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department said.

He confirmed, however, that the Cabinet discussed recent developments related to Malaysia-Singapore ties.

Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu said the freeze applies only to cultural and sports ties.

"There was supposed to be an understanding to be signed between the governments of Singapore and Malaysia in sports and culture very soon. The

directive from the Cabinet is to hold that for some time," he told a news conference.

Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik said meetings between the tourism ministries of Malaysia and Singapore are to be suspended.

"Meetings of the Malaysia-Singapore joint-promotion committee on tourism, for example, have been suspended indefinitely," he told reporters.

"The suspension of activities also includes sports competitions between civil servants of both countries. The matter was discussed seriously during the Cabinet meeting. Everybody is not happy with Singapore, without exception."

In Singapore, wire reports quoted Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong as saying yesterday he wanted to take some time to understand the latest Malaysian Cabinet reaction "before I give further comments."

The Singapore Foreign Ministry meanwhile in a statement "reaffirmed Singapore's continued commitment towards maintaining close bilateral relations with Malaysia."

"As Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has said, Singapore would let Malaysia set the pace and level of bilateral cooperation," it added.

The statement also noted Dr Mahathir's comments that he did not consider the current situation as a major problem.

Both the ringgit and the Singapore dollar fell against the US dollar yesterday, believed by analysts and dealers to be due to reports of the freeze in ties. The ringgit eased to 2.4805/15 from 2.4770/80 and the Singapore dollar hit an 18-month low of about 1.44.

The Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange Composite Index eased 2.28 to 1,223.31 while Singapore's Straits Times Industrial Index dropped 12.68 to 2,098.92.