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Singapore PM: We'll do our part to improve co-operation with Malaysia

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said today his Government would do its part to restore and improve co-operation at a pace Malaysia is comfortable with.

He said Singapore believed that closer co-operation between Malaysia and the island republic would benefit both countries.

Goh's statement, which was released at 6.30pm, came a day after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said media reports that Malaysia had frozen fresh bilateral dealings with Singapore were untrue.

The statement reads:

"I welcome Dr Mahathir's assurance that media reports of a Malaysian Cabinet decision to freeze Malaysia-Singapore relations are not true.

"I am saddened that our bilateral relations have been upset by Senior Minister's remarks on Johor. Senior Minister had said that it was never his intention to cause offence. In fact, Senior Minister had immediately apologised to the Malaysians.

"The Malaysian Cabinet has accepted his apology.

"We believe that closer co-operation between Malaysia and Singapore will benefit both countries. We will do our part to restore and improve co-operation at a pace Malaysia is comfortable with.

"We want good relations with Malaysia and my remarks on March 25 were intended to be helpful and to improve relations."

Goh's statement came a day after Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said while Malaysia sought to normalise ties with Singapore, the republic should also share the burden of restoring relations to the old level.

He said the Cabinet at its weekly meeting on Wednesday reaffirmed that relations with Singapore should be normalised but noted that they should be based on the principles of reciprocity.

He said as the "quality of the partnership" between the two countries had been brought into question by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's remarks on Johor, it would take time and effort for both sides to re-establish previous levels of confidence.

The diplomatic row between Malaysia and Singapore followed Lee's remarks on Johor, describing the State as "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings".

Lee made the statement in a sworn affidavit in a libel suit filed in the Singapore High Court on Jan 27 against political opponent Tang Liang Hong, who fled to Johor in January saying he feared for his safety in Singapore.

Lee has since apologised twice.

On March 25, Goh reportedly said in Laos that even though Singapore would take steps to restore ties, the pace would largely be determined by Malaysia.

Meanwhile, a poll of 50 Singaporeans early this week showed that seven in 10 thought Lee should not have made the disparaging comments about Johor, and that Malaysia was justified in demanding an apology, the Singapore Straits Times reported today.

A minority thought the Malaysian reaction was understandable and that Lee's remarks were sufficient provocation for the outburst. However, it said many were surprised and a few were hurt by the vehemence of the reaction which continued unabated after the first apology.

They pointed out that Lee had already apologised for the offence caused.

The paper quoted lawyer Shrinivas Rai as saying he was "a little hurt at the newspaper outbursts".

Former MP and economics lecturer Augustine Tan said: "We should take exception to the insults heaped on the Senior Minister. He is the father of the nation and has done us proud. He has preciously apologised and asked for his statement to be removed from court records."

The report said questions such as whether Malaysia was merely displaying its righteous anger or whether there were other extraneous factors, were also raised.

It also said this time around, the ferocity of the reaction suggested that Malaysians did not view this as just another hiccup in bilateral ties, but were expressing a deeper sense of outrage.

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