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Mahathir - Singapore

TIES TO RETURN TO NORMAL AFTER M'SIANS GET OVER HURT

By: Syed Jamil Jaafar

TOKYO, March 27 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's relations with Singapore will be back to normal as soon as Malaysians got over their feeling of hurt and bitterness caused by an uncalled for remark against their country, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said here today.

Commenting on yesterday's Cabinet decision to cool off ties and put off fresh dealings with the island republic, Dr Mahathir said his Cabinet colleagues must have some good reason to take the decision.

'I need to talk to them and get an explanation before I can comment further,' said Dr Mahathir at a press conference at the Japan National Press Club.

Malaysians were infuriated when Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew called Johor a crime-ridden state 'notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings.'

Lee has since apologised twice but statements by Singapore leaders including Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar on the matter apparently did not go down well with the Malaysian government.

Dr Mahathir however said he did not see the latest development as a major problem.

'Naturally between neighbours there will be differences off and on but we have already stated that over time this feeling (of hurt) can be overcome.

'This decision was taken in my absence (the Cabinet meeting was chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim) and they must have some good reason.

'I'd like to know more about this before I can explain or give the reason why.

'However I don't see this as a major problem.

'As far as we are concerned (normal) relations with Singapore will resume as soon as the people got over the feeling of hurt and bitterness caused by an uncalled for remark against Malaysia,' the Prime Minister said.

Dr Mahathir is here on a four-day official visit accompanied by Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman.

Meanwhile in KUALA LUMPUR, acting Foreign Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha clarified today that the Cabinet, at its meeting yesterday, did not decide on freezing of ties with Singapore.

His statement followed media reports today quoting several ministers of the cabinet's decision on freezing fresh bilateral dealings with Singapore in the wake of recent developments following Lee's derogatory statements about Johor.

Abang Abu Bakar, who is also Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, confirmed that the Cabinet meeting chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim discussed recent developments related to Malaysia-Singapore ties.

He said the government was studying the implications of the episode on bilateral ties with Singapore following the statement by Lee on Johor and the Singapore government's reaction over it. -- BERNAMA

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