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Ties with S'pore can normalise (HL)

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TOKYO, Thurs. - Malaysia's relations with Singapore will normalise as soon as Malaysians get 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.

He said he needed to find out more about yesterday's Cabinet decision from his Cabinet colleagues before commenting further on the issue.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on the decision which called for a "cooling off" in relations with Singapore over its Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's disparaging remarks about Johor.

Dr Mahathir was speaking at a Press conference at the Japan National Press Club. The Prime Minister is here on a four-day official visit accompanied by his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, 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.

Yesterday, in a further reaction to the furore caused by the offensive statements by Lee, the Malaysian Cabinet at its meeting decided on a "cooling off" in relations with the republic.

It is understood that while normal relations would be maintained, no special effort would be made to deepen contacts with the southern neighbour.

Dr Mahathir, however, said he did not see the latest development as a major problem. "Naturally, there will be differences off and on between neighbours but we have already stated that, over time, this feeling (of hurt) can be overcome.

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

In Kuala Lumpur, the Cabinet decision met with general approval from many quarters. Political leaders contacted today said the move was to send a signal to Singapore leaders that Malaysia was deeply hurt by Lee's remarks and subsequent statements by other Singapore leaders.

Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said Malaysia was hurt by the remarks and it would take "some time to forgive and forget".

Another Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib said he fully supported the Cabinet's decision.

He said the decision was wise given the Singapore Government's lack of sensitivity in handling the matter.

Backbenchers Club president Ruhanie Ahmad said it was clear that Singapore leaders should be more sensitive and refrain from making statements which could strain bilateral ties.

"This latest action by the Cabinet should not be interpreted as a confrontation with Singapore... there is a need for them to do some soul-searching," he added.

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