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Ties with S'pore not frozen, says PM

MEDIA reports that said Malaysia was freezing ties with Singapore were not true, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said in Osaka yesterday.

The Prime Minister told reporters at the end of his visit to the Japanese city that his deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, had contacted him on Thursday and explained that the news reports were not true.

"There is no freeze, nothing is frozen ... (Anwar) did not say that," the Prime Minister said when asked to comment on news that the Cabinet on Wednesday, which was chaired by Anwar, had decided to freeze fresh bilateral dealings with Singapore following the diplomatic ruckus caused by Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's disparaging statement on Johor.

Dr Mahathir's comments were aired by RTM on its 8pm news bulletin last night. The Prime Minister is on an official visit to Japan covering Tokyo, Osaka and Fukuoka.

In Kuala Lumpur, Anwar told reporters that the Cabinet on Wednesday had decided "to continue to normalise relations but this will not happen immediately".

He said the Cabinet reaffirmed the decision that had been taken at its previous meeting on March 19 to continue to have relations with Singapore. The March 19 Cabinet also stressed that it would take time to restore ties to the previous level.

"The Cabinet in its meeting on Wednesday discussed the events following the disparaging remarks on Malaysia by the republic's Senior Minister.

"The Cabinet feels, along with the Malaysian people, that good neighbourly relations are built upon the principle of reciprocity, nurtured by mutual understanding and respect for one another.

"We, therefore, regret that some members of the Singapore Government seem to lack in insight and earnestness, even appear to trivialise the issue," he told reporters after visiting the Chow Kit hawkers' centre along Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

The diplomatic ruckus was sparked by Lee's statement in a sworn affidavit at a Singapore court describing Johor as "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings". Lee had since apologised and moved to expunge the offending paragraphs from the affidavit.

Asked if Dr Mahathir had been informed of the clarification on the Cabinet's decision, Anwar said he had conveyed this to the Prime Minister on Thursday.

"The Prime Minister appreciates and gives his consent to the Cabinet's views because they are consistent with the earlier (March 19) decision.

"But this matter cropped up because of the different expressions raised by the general public due to the manner some Singapore leaders responded to the issue.

"Notwithstanding those expressions, the Cabinet reaffirmed the decision to normalise the relations and would also request that Singapore leaders reciprocate.

"In any bilateral relations through reciprocal arrangement, we have shown a lot of respect and tolerance. We have not been abusive or made derogatory remarks.

"Neighbourly relations must conform to the spirit of reciprocity," he said, adding that Singapore should not be totally dependent on Malaysia to mend ties.

He also said Malaysia will convey the Cabinet's decision to the Singapore Government in due course.

Asked about the varying accounts given by ministers on the Cabinet's decision on Wednesday, Anwar said:

"I understand the public's feelings as voiced by the ministers during the Cabinet meeting that some Singapore leaders were not sensitive and did not understand the (implications) of Lee's disparaging remarks.

"However, we also have to admit that there is still a need to instil a spirit of cooperation between the two countries. That is why we decided during the Cabinet meeting that we will continue to normalise relations but this will not happen immediately."

Reports that appeared the day after the Cabinet meeting, quoting sources and confirmed by some members of the Cabinet, said while normal relations will be maintained, no special effort will be made to deepen contacts with the republic. The reports also said existing bilateral relations would also be suspended for the time being.

On Thursday, the day most local newspapers splashed the report on their front pages, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu said the freeze would be confined to cultural and sports activities.

Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik said meetings between the tourism ministries of Malaysia and Singapore were to be suspended following the freeze. He also confirmed that the suspension in ties would affect sports competitions between civil servants from both countries.

On the same day, however, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha, who is acting Foreign Minister, issued a statement to say that the news reports on the freeze were "not quite accurate".

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