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Lead Anwar-Singapore

TIME NEEDED TO RESTORE CONFIDENCE

KUALA LUMPUR, March 28 (Bernama) -- Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said today the Cabinet which met on Wednesday decided that bilateral ties with Singapore will continue but it will take time to restore the previous level of confidence.

"We reaffirmed in the Cabinet that we will continue normal bilateral ties, only that it will not happen so fast...but it will take time," he told reporters after visiting petty traders in the Chow Kit area here.

This is the first statement by Anwar following press reports that Malaysia will freeze fresh bilateral dealings with the republic after the controversy sparked by the disparaging remarks by Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew on Johor.

When asked on fresh dealings with Singapore in the future, he said: "Of course we want to continue with it but you don't expect it be done at a pace that we want to see initially...it depends on how Singapore responds as bilateral relations is a reciprocal arrangement."

After the news conference, a three paragraph statement by Anwar was issued on the Cabinet's discussion on Singapore at its weekly meeting chaired by him in the absence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is on an official visit to Japan.

In the statement, Anwar said the Cabinet discussed the events following the disparaging remarks by Lee who had described Johor as being "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings".

The Cabinet regretted that some members of the Singapore government "seem to lack in insight and earnestness, even appear to trivialise what is at issue."

Anwar said the Cabinet reaffirmed its decision on March 19 to accept Lee's apology and reaffirmed that "we seek to normalise relations with Singapore".

"However, such relations are a partnership. It is the quality of the partnership that has been brought into question, naturally it will take time and effort on both sides to re-establish previous levels of confidence," he said.

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

On March 19, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced after the weekly Cabinet meeting that the Malaysian Government accepted Lee's unreserved apology but said it would take time to restore the relations to the old level.

After the Cabinet meeting two days ago, several ministers, including Cultural, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik said the Cabinet decided to put off fresh dealings with Singapore because it was unhappy with subsequent comments by Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar.

Asked on this, Anwar said: "I understand the feelings of regret of Malaysians as expressed by the ministers at the Cabinet meeting as it seems that some Singapore leaders do not appear to be sensitive and appreciate the the anxiety following Lee's wild allegations."

"That is why I understand the feelings of those who wish to seek views (over this) in the Cabinet," he said.

When asked whether there were ministers who suggested the freezing of

ties at the government level, Anwar said this was some of the views expressed by them.

"I explained to them that I could understand their uneasiness and the disappointment and anger of the people...in fact there was a specific suggestion but our decision was to continue bilateral ties although we are aware that it will take time," he said.

When asked whether there was a suggestion to freeze dealings with Singapore in the fields of sports and culture, he said: "There were suggestions based on the proposals submitted to various ministers and ministries.

"But I have said notwithstanding all these expressions of concern or disappointment, the Cabinet reaffirmed its earlier decision to normalise relations with Singapore," he said.

Asked what Malaysia expects from Singapore, he said: "It's up to them (Singapore)...we leave it to them. We hope that the Singapore government will bear the responsibility to normalise relations."

Anwar said Malaysia has shown respect and tolerance and had not been abusive or made disparaging statements about its neighbours.

"If we make accusations against our neighbour and later apologise, it is not easy for the neighbour to carry on as normal but it will take time," he said.

Anwar said that Malaysia should appreciate that there ought to be a willingness to continue cooperation between the two countries.

"Only that as we say before, restoring normal relations could not happen so fast but will take time and that a spirit of cooperation is vital and there should be reciprocity and mutual respect even if there are differences of views," he said. -- BERNAMA

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