

15/06/1997

## Umno Youth chief closes book on strained relations

Chong Chee Seong

MUAR, Sat. - Umno Youth has decided to "close the book" on the issue of Malaysia-Singapore relations and work towards normalising ties between both countries.

Youth leader Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said the movement's stand was in line with the call by the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister to bury the hatchet and renew bilateral ties.

"Umno Youth now treats the issue as closed and will move along with our national leaders to help normalise relations between our two countries.

"Our stand is simple ... to respect each other as close neighbours, we should avoid quarrels and instead strive to maintain good relations," he said.

He was speaking to reporters after opening the Ledang Umno Youth division delegates' conference at Tangkak here today.

Ahmad Zahid stressed that Umno Youth had decided to begin a new era of co-operation, understanding and goodwill between both countries.

He said: "As close neighbours, we need to weigh any problem rationally. We cannot act irrationally as this might hurt the feelings of people in both countries.

"There will always be hiccups in relations but we must exercise restraint so as not to destroy the trust and confidence which had been built up over the years between the Governments and peoples of both countries," he said.

Ahmad Zahid said to accelerate the normalisation of relations, it was imperative that all concerned refrain from making any "irresponsible statements" which could harm friendly ties between both countries.

Asked if this was an about-turn in Umno Youth's stand towards Singapore, he said the question did not arise because the Youth movement would never compromise with anyone with ulterior motives and out to insult the feelings of fellow Malaysians.

He also denied a Singapore Straits Times report on Friday, which quoted him as saying that he had offered to apologise personally to Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, for the harsh remarks he had made about him at the height of the row between the two countries.

The Singapore media, he claimed, had "distorted his words" with the intent of embarrassing him and creating confusion.

He clarified that he had met his Singapore counterpart, Young PAP chairman Brigadier General George Yeo on Thursday, while attending Bank Simpanan Nasional's annual sports meet with the POSB Bank in the republic.

Ahmad Zahid, who is also BSN chairman, said he was given the blessing of the Umno Youth executive council to meet the Singapore leader.

"We had cordial talks which centred mostly on the Malaysia-Singapore issue. Yeo brought up the matter of the Umno Youth protest in Johor Baru recently."

(On March 13, about 300 Umno Youth members greeted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad (who was in Johor on a visit) at the Senai Airport, with placards protesting against Lee's remarks.

(Some of the protesters had carried placards hurling abuses at Lee, with terms such as "anak haram" (bastard), for the disparaging remarks Lee had made about Johor in a court document).

"Yeo told me Young PAP leaders were unhappy about the harsh words used in the protest banners. I expressed my disagreement with the actions of

some of the protestors, and offered my apologies for the mistake.

"But I made it clear that the demonstration was a genuine expression of unhappiness by Umno Youth members over Lee's uncouth remarks about Johor," he said.

Ahmad Zahid said the Singapore media, however, had taken his apology out of context and had misquoted him as saying that he was tendering his personal apology to Lee Kuan Yew and the people of Singapore.

"The Singapore media had misunderstood and misinterpreted my statement," he said, adding that "perhaps my English is poor and the reporters could not understand me fully."

"I hope my clarification here will help clear the air," he said.

(END)