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Keng Yaik: I did not mean to insult estate workers

PETALING JAYA, Sun. - Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik said he had no bad intentions either to degrade or insult estate workers as reported by a Tamil language daily.

He said what he intended to convey at the Dewan Negara last Thursday was to ask estate workers to increase productivity through tapping methods that could improve their income.

"However, my facts were distorted and I feel sad about the report.

"I will discuss with lawyers and ask translators to study the report and will possibly take a court action against the daily if proven that there is a distortion of facts."

Dr Lim was speaking to reporters after opening the Selangor Gerakan delegates' meeting today.

In a reply to Senator N. Marimuthu on why his Ministry did not propose a monthly salary for rubber tappers when the rubber price was high, Dr Lim had been reported as saying:

"Depan pokok kita boleh nampak dia, belakang pokok you tahulah, so dengan itu macam mana menteri boleh buat pendirian atau sokong gaji bulanan."

(In front of the tree we can see him; behind it you know la, so how can the minister make a stand or support monthly salary.)

Dr Lim today said he was aware that estate and farm workers were working hard and had obtained quite a lucrative income that could contribute towards the country's economy.

He urged the National Union of Plantation Workers and Malaysian Agricultural Producers Association to buy equipment and change the less productive technique of rubber tapping to new techniques like low-frequency tapping system that can increase the rubber tappers' income.

Meanwhile, in Johor Baru, the Malaysian Trades Union Congress will issue a memorandum to Dr Lim tomorrow, demanding that he retract his derogatory remarks about rubber tappers and tender an apology.

MTUC president Senator Zainal Rampak, who described Dr Lim's remarks in the Dewan Rakyat on Thursday as "insensitive, disrespectful and totally uncalled-for", said the remarks were a slur on all workers and not just rubber tappers.

Zainal said estate workers had made invaluable contributions to the nation before Independence and after, as they had powered the growth of the country's agricultural sector.

"The remarks are hurtful and unkind. They deserve better," he said.

"He obviously looks down on the contribution of all Malaysian workers to the nation.

"He owes every worker in this country an apology," he said.

Zainal said this at a Workers' Day high tea organised by the MTUC Johor chapter.

"Has the Minister forgotten that he himself was an advocate of monthly wages for estate workers?"

"His Ministry had proposed it early last year, to make it attractive for workers affected by the economic downturn to return to the agricultural sector. I still have the newspaper cutting on it."

In Kuala Lumpur, People's Progressive Party of Malaysia president Datuk M. Kayveas also demanded an apology from Dr Lim.

After launching PPP's two-week nationwide car wash to raise money for

the Barisan Bertindak Kosovo Fund, he said:

"I would like to invite Dr Lim to the estate where I came from (Benta, Pahang) to see for himself what the rubber tappers do behind the trees."

In Ipoh, the DAP urged Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to sack Dr Lim if he did not apologise or retract his statement.

Party secretary-general Lim Kit Siang said Dr Lim should also be censured for his remarks.

Lim also proposed that the Cabinet set up a committee to look into the issue of monthly wages and better housing facilities for rubber tappers.

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