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Keng Yaik apologises for remarks (HL)

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik has apologised to rubber tappers for his alleged offensive remarks about them in the Dewan Negara last Thursday.

"After my explanation, however, if any particular word used has offended estate workers," he said in a statement today, "I sincerely apologise for any offence felt which was never intended to be."

Dr Lim's controversial remarks came during his reply to Senator N. Marimuthu on the reason why his Ministry did not propose a monthly wage for rubber tappers when rubber price was high.

Dr Lim was reported to have said: "Depan pokok kita boleh nampak dia, belakang pokok you tahulah, so dengan itu macamana menteri boleh buat pendirian atau sokong gaji bulanan?"

(In front of the tree we can see them but behind the tree, you know, lah. So, with that, how can the minister make a stand or support monthly salary?)

The statement created a furore as trade unions and political parties took exception to what they deemed as an insult.

Dr Lim issued the statement after reviewing the Hansard, the official recorder of statements made in Parliament.

Reiterating that he never intended to insult rubber tappers, he maintained that his remarks in the Senate were taken out of context.

"I understand and appreciate the contribution of rubber tappers to the country's economy," he said.

On the issue of monthly wages for plantation workers, Dr Lim said the Government could not make a decision on the matter because the Government was not paying their salaries.

The matter, he said, depended on the negotiations between the National Union of Plantation Workers and the Malaysian Agricultural Producers Association, and whatever decisions were taken by the Industrial Court.

Dr Lim said he had, in the last few years, spoken to the plantation sector about sharing a portion of its profits with workers.

"I wish the estate workers all the success in their struggle to get better incomes and I, as Minister of Primary Industries, through the research institute in Malaysia Rubber Board, will do my utmost to help them."

When asked to comment on the controversy, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said it would be good if Dr Lim explained to the Cabinet about his statement.

However, the Cabinet had not asked for an explanation, he said.

"If he wants to explain to the Cabinet, that would be good. Let us all understand what really transpired," he told reporters at the Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel today after launching the book A New Deal for Asia written by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Abdullah said he did not know if the issue of monthly wages for rubber tappers was discussed by the Cabinet as he had been on leave.

"If it has not," he said, "it should be because it is an important issue."

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