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`I accept Chua's explanation' (HL)

Saiful Azhar Abdullah in Maputo, Mozambique; Hizreen Kamal
PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the issue of special rights and privileges for Malays, as raised by National Economic Consultative Council deputy chairman Datuk David Chua, should not be blown out of proportion.

He said Chua had clarified the matter with him and he had accepted the explanation.

Dr Mahathir said this during a Press conference on Monday night for Malaysian journalists covering the Southern Africa International Dialogue 2000.

He was asked on the controversy caused by Chua who was reported to have suggested that special rights for Malays be abolished.

Chua, who is also deputy general secretary of the Associated Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia, met Dr Mahathir in Kuala Lumpur last Friday to clarify his remarks first reported in the Far Eastern Economic Review and later, in a local Malay language newspaper.

Dr Mahathir said: "If he said he did not mean that (as the reports made it out to be), it's okay, we'll accept it."

In his statement in Kuala Lumpur on Aug 19, Chua said he explained to Dr Mahathir that he did not at all raise the issue of doing away with special rights for Malays as they are enshrined in the Federal Constitution.

When asked further whether he was satisfied with Chua's explanation, the Prime Minister said he reminded Chua not to raise the sensitive matter again.

"He said he did not expect the people to react the way they did," Dr Mahathir said.

The Prime Minister was also asked whether Chua's reported remarks about Malay rights would jeopardise the formulation of economic policies by the NECC Two, (the Second National Economic Consultative Council).

Dr Mahathir replied that he did not think so since the council only drafts policies and the Government would be the one giving the policies the final shape.

Meanwhile in Kuala Lumpur, Hizreen Kamal reports MCA vice-president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting as saying that unity and understanding among the people of different races and backgrounds would be jeopardised overnight if racial issues continued to be raised.

He said this when asked to respond to a newspaper report yesterday suggesting that the widening gap between the number of Malay and non-Malay professionals was because Malay students could not afford the high fees in private universities.

The report quoted Universiti Malaya's Business and Accounting lecturer Nawi Abdullah as predicting a wider gap by 2003 when non-Malay students of private universities would graduate.

"All Malaysians should look at this issue rationally and objectively," he told reporters after witnessing a Memorandum of Understanding signing ceremony between the Multimedia University and two local technology companies, Intranesis Communications Sdn Bhd and RQ NET Sdn Bhd here at Cyberjaya.