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MCA-Nanyang

CHUA JUI MENG AND NINE OTHERS QUESTION NANYANG DEAL

By: Alan Ting

KUALA LUMPUR, May 29 (Bernama) -- The controversial proposed takeover of two major Chinese newspapers by the MCA's investment arm took another twist today with party vice-president Datuk Chua Jui Meng questioning the move and nine other leaders asking the party to review the RM230 million deal.

In a hand-written statement issued here upon his return from attending a World Health Organisation (WHO) meeting in Geneva, Chua said that no political party or the MCA could afford to have a "large gap between its perception and that of the community it represents".

"I have been following the events of this controversy from abroad and obtaining feedback from the community and its leaders. The gap is now big and growing and as a party leader, I feel this is disturbing," said Chua, who is the Health Minister.

In recent weeks, the MCA's proposed acquisition of Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press has been greeted by protests and concern from several Chinese associations, non-governmental organisations and a number of employees of the two dailies.

They fear that the sale of the two newspapers to Huaren Holdings by the publisher, Nanyang Press Holdings Bhd, will curb press freedom of the two dailies.

The protests came despite an assurance by MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik that the takeover was purely a commercial deal and his statement that the party did not interfere in the running of The Star, Malaysia's largest-selling English newspaper, which is also owned by Huaren Holdings.

Nanyang Press Holdings yesterday announced that it had accepted a RM230 million cash offer by Huaren and the deal would be signed on Thursday.

Chua said no political party should ignore or reject consciously the views and opinions of the majority of the community it represented.

"I love the MCA, I love the Barisan Nasional and I truly appreciate the Chinese community which in the last two general elections strongly supported us. Do we now ignore their views, do we wish to risk an erosion of their support?" he said

"What we do today as trustees and shareholders of Huaren, as central committee members, will be judged by the Chinese community in the next general election. Remember that we hold our position today as trustees for the party, the community and the nation," he said in the strongly-worded statement.

Chua also said that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, had clearly stated it was entirely up to the MCA leaders, trustees and shareholders of Huaren to make their own decision.

Dr Mahathir had said yesterday that he was adopting a hands-off policy over the matter and that he neither supported or objected to the deal.

Chua also expressed his displeasure over the fact that no meeting had been held to discuss the deal although he is one of the four trustees and a shareholder of Huaren Holdings.

"Yet I'm told that an agreement has been entered into with Hume Industries, the owner of Nanyang Press by certain persons purporting to represent Huaren and that they had paid 10 per cent of the purchase price," he said.

Chua also questioned the decision reached at the party's emergency presidential council meeting last Monday that The Star Publication was to take over Nanyang Press, saying that it was not The Star, but Huaren that was now taking over Nanyang Press.

He questioned the propriety of calling for the central committee meeting tomorrow when a meeting of the trustees and shareholders should have been called first to consider the feasibility report of the proposed takeover.

Chua said he did not know the cash reserve of Huaren and whether Huaren could pay the full purchase price.

Questioning the urgency to take over the Nanyang Press he reminded the people of the bitter lesson in the 1980's when the Chinese community lost Multi-Purpose Holdings, then considered an economic empire and jewel of the Malaysian Chinese.

He also referred to the now defunct "Tong Bao" newspaper which he said collapsed because the Chinese ceased to support it and asked what would happen to Huaren's investment if the current Chinese readership abandoned Nanyang Press.

Meanwhile, a group of MCA elected representatives comprising two MPs and seven state assemblymen called on the party to reconsider its decision to buy the two newspapers.

They are Serdang MP Datuk Yap Pian Hon, Bentong MP Liow Tiong Lai and state assemblymen Hoh Khai Mun, Fong Koong Fuee, Chan Choon Fah, Chan Kam, Dr Ho Wai Cheong, Datuk Lee Chee Leong and Loh Yoon Foo.

"In view that the party's action in this matter will cause tension between the party and the Chinese community, we hope that the party will react positively to this objection," they said in a joint statement.

They said that if the MCA did not reconsider the matter, the Barisan Nasional (BN) and the party would face stiff challenge in the next general election.

DAP chairman Lim Kit Siang said the removal of several executives and editorial heads of Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press following the announcement of the deal showed that the takeover was politically-motivated and not a pure business deal as claimed by Dr Ling.

"If the MCA takeover is a pure business deal, the proper first thing the new owner would have done would be to give an assurance to the staff of the two newspapers that not a single job would be terminated, so long as they continue to serve the newspapers loyally as in the past," he said in a statement here.

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