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Consider the matter closed, PM advises headmasters and NUTP

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SHAH ALAM, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today advised parties embroiled in the school racial segregation controversy not to blow the issue out of proportion and to "consider the matter closed".

Dr Mahathir said he did not see the need for anyone to haul the National Union of the Teaching Profession and its secretary-general Datuk N. Siva Subramaniam to court over claims that some schools practised racial segregation.

"Human beings make mistakes, this we have to take into account. If he apologises, that's sufficient ... consider the matter closed and there is no further need to fight over it," he said after opening the Selangor Barisan Nasional Convention 2002 at Kompleks Belia in Section 7 here.

The Prime Minister was asked to comment on plans by a few headmasters and Parent-Teacher Associations to file a million-ringgit defamation suit against Siva Subramaniam and the NUTP.

However, two headmasters in Johor Baru yesterday postponed their plans, citing the need for more time to prepare a credible case against Siva Subramaniam and the NUTP.

The police have set up a task force to investigate reports lodged by five PTAs against Siva Subramaniam and NUTP president Tengku Habsah Tengku Petra.

Police recorded statements from both Tengku Habsah and Siva Subramaniam at the Federal Police headquarters today. They were at Bukit Aman from 8.30am to 1.30pm.

The task force is headed by Federal CID prosecution division head Senior Assistant Commissioner Hashim Sharaf. The case is being investigated under Section 4(1)(b) of the Sedition Act 1948.

The offence is punishable with a fine not exceeding RM5,000 or up to three years' jail, or both.

On the RM1 million in damages being sought from Siva Subramaniam, Dr Mahathir said: "That is a different matter, they are trying to make money."

On the headmasters' contention that their reputation had been tarnished following Siva Subramaniam's allegation, hence the need to file the suit, the Prime Minister said he did not think anyone's image had been affected.

Dr Mahathir said Siva Subramaniam's claims were not as grave as those who deliberately opposed efforts by the Government to bring pupils of different ethnic groups closer.

"When we try to bring pupils closer, they opposed. This is more serious (an act). When we wanted to build Vision Schools, they disagreed and wanted pupils to be segregated.

"Then they alleged that we wanted to close this and that school whereas we had laws preventing such things from happening. Previously, they said the matter would be solved if we had a law on it but even after we introduced the law, the same issue was brought up."

He said criticisms should instead be directed at these groups.

On statement by Singapore National Development Minister Mah Bow Tan yesterday that the republic would continue the reclamation project off the Straits of Tebrau despite complaints from Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said: "We hope Singapore will co-operate. If they want us to co-operate with them, they should also co-operate with us."

Dr Mahathir said an Environmental Impact Assessment was being carried

out on the effects of the reclamation work, but it would take some time before the findings could be ready.

To a suggestion that Singapore be asked to temporarily stop the reclamation work while waiting for the study to be completed, the Prime Minister said the republic's Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong promised to consider Malaysia's concerns during their recent meeting in Kuala Lumpur.

"But now we have another Minister saying work would continue...so it will be difficult."
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