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Not a witch-hunt

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WITH newspapers front-paging reports of police investigations into alleged mismanagement at the cargo arm of Malaysia Airlines - in some cases implicating personalities once close to the Government - the clarification by the Prime Minister on the issue could not have been more necessary.

Since a police report was made by the airline's new management some weeks ago, all kinds of statements and comments have made the front page and prime-time television news.

One English newspaper untypically front-paged a call by DAP chairman Lim Kit Siang for former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin to explain the buy-back of MAS shares by the Government.

It is not very often that the former Opposition Leader makes it to the front page of a newspaper. So, when he did, and in an establishment-oriented newspaper at that, it understandably raised some eyebrows.

That newspaper's headline was: 'Kit Siang: Daim must explain MAS stake buy-back'. The opposition stalwart made the demand when commenting on police investigations into the MAS Kargo report.

Speaking on his return from a month-long vacation abroad, the Prime Minister reiterated that the Government was not on a witch-hunt or targeting anyone in particular by taking over big companies like MAS.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said: 'We are not after anyone in particular or businessmen close to certain personalities. What we are trying to do is to overcome problems faced by several big companies that are facing cash-flow problems due to the current economic situation.'

He added: 'In the case of MAS, the decision to lodge the police report was made by the management of the company. The Government is only waiting for the outcome of the investigation. This is not an effort to topple anyone and I hope (the) people will stop speculating that we are on a witch-hunt against certain people linked to someone.'

The explanation should clarify the situation, which had become somewhat murky following reports in some newspapers linking the MAS issue with Daim.

Dr Mahathir said the situation needed to be explained as the case had been sensationalised by the media as a clear move by the Government against certain people.

Sensationalised is the word. One English tabloid went to the extent of describing the former MAS chairman, Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli, as 'one of a coterie of Malay tycoons with close links to former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, who resigned in the middle of last year'.

It published, over several days, a series of page one reports implicating a handful of businessmen, mostly Bumiputeras, as the likely targets of future investigations.

Clearly, either out of genuine concern for public interest or for some insidious reasons, many people have been second-guessing the Prime Minister who, in a meeting with Malaysian students in London, was asked questions on MAS and other troubled companies.

A senior aide of the Prime Minister said Dr Mahathir's comments on the issue should be seen in the context of the questions put forward by the students.

But some people and a segment of the media had clearly turned the MAS issue into one of intrigue and conspiracy.

It is unfortunate that the Government's efforts to put the corporate

sector back on track by solving the debt problems of some companies are being interpreted as political witch-hunting and used as an excuse to malign certain personalities.

Whether this campaign of misinformation is motivated by personal considerations or by the larger public interest, allegations of cronyism will render the Government's effort to rebuild the Bumiputera business community and the Malaysia Incorporated Policy - as recently alluded to by Special Economic Adviser to the Prime Minister Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcob - that much more difficult.

The Prime Minister said: `(But) all businessmen are linked to the Government. We are in the process of creating successful Bumiputera entrepreneurs, so we have to choose people who we believe have the capacity and capability, but then they are called our cronies.

`If people start saying that everybody whom we help are our cronies, we might as well abandon the Bumiputera policy.'

Abandoning the Bumiputera policy just because a handful of Bumiputera-owned companies are facing difficulties, due either to the economic downturn or bad management, is out of the question.

Neither the Government nor the people who take pleasure in condemning the failed Bumiputera businessmen can afford to have the policy withdrawn. Even the country as a whole cannot afford it. Withdrawal of the policy would almost certainly destabilise it.

To be fair to the Government and its Bumiputera policy, it must be acknowledged that not every Bumiputera businessman is a failure and not all non-Bumiputera businesses were spared the damning effects of the 1997 regional financial crisis.

The difference is, the troubled non-Bumiputera companies and businessmen do not come into sharp public focus because they are generally independent of the Government.

They might have borrowed heavily to finance their pre-crisis expansion. Their debts are as burdensome to the banking system as those of the Bumiputeras. But they are generally spared public scrutiny and bashing because they rely less on the Government for projects and assistance.

Also, the Chinese are more cohesive in conducting business. They are more supportive of each other. And since the majority of Chinese are in business, they are not in the habit of running down one another, at least not publicly.

This is one trait the Bumiputeras must learn to adopt if they want to be successful in business. They must do away with the tendency for *hasat dengki* (jealousy and vengeance).

Rebuilding the Bumiputera business community and Malaysia Inc should be everybody's priority if they are serious about putting the economy back on track. And if they are still committed to Vision 2020.

It is an ultimate insult to the Prime Minister to interpret the Government's action as witch-hunting. If there is anything the Prime Minister can be blamed for, it has to be his tolerance of foolishness and his forgiving nature.

Otherwise, how do we explain the fact that so many of his `sworn enemies' and remnants of past administrations are still serving him and the Government?

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