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Singapore Minister draws flak for remarks on Malaysian newsmen

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A SINGAPORE Minister may have bitten off more than he could chew when he likened Malaysian journalists covering a recent event in the republic to wild animals.

Minister of State for National Development Dr Vivian Balakrishnan may have made the statement in jest, but this was not the view of most Malaysians quoted in the Malay media.

Berita Harian quoted politicians and a former editor-in-chief of Utusan Malaysia as saying the Young PAP vice-chairman should have been circumspect in his views.

Datuk Zainuddin Maidin, a former newsman and now Information Ministry Parliamentary Secretary, said Balakrishnan's views may reflect the manner in which Singapore journalists approached their leaders.

The Senator said Singapore scribes were overawed by their political leaders and, thus, kept their distance.

And this was probably why, he said, Balakrishnan reacted the way he did in a speech at a luncheon last week for Young PAP leaders which was hosted by a visiting Umno Youth delegation.

Berita Harian, in a Page 2 report headlined "Singapore Journalists are Rats and the Basis for Young PAP Leader's Statement", quoted Zainuddin as saying that the Singapore views probably came from the "open" manner Umno Youth head Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein treated Malaysian reporters covering his trip to the republic.

Johor Baru Umno Youth chief Abu Talib Alias, in another report the same day, said Young PAP leaders at the luncheon clapped in support of Balakrishnan's statement while Umno Youth leaders kept silent.

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said Balakrishnan's statement went against the spirit of Young PAP's assertion that it wanted stronger Malaysia-Singapore ties.

Utusan Malaysia quoted Hishammuddin as saying that Malaysian journalists had to defend themselves and not expect politicians to come to their rescue.

It was a week of unwelcome publicity for the Malaysian media with Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong reproaching them on Thursday for raising issues that pitted Singapore against Malaysia.

Speaking to The Straits Times of Singapore in Australia during the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting recently, he castigated newsmen in Malaysia for a spate of anti-Singapore articles.

He alleged that the latest Malaysian effort was in relation to the reclamation of land by Singapore in its waters.

Berita Harian quoted him as saying that "Singapore will not do anything wrong" in the reclamation issue.

The newspaper said he accused the Malaysia media of raising the sale of water to the republic and the tudung controversy before this.

It was not all brickbats, however, for the Malaysian media.

Malawi Information Minister Clement Stambuli, on a visit here, was quoted by Berita Harian on Tuesday as saying that the Malaysia media was free compared with many countries.

Describing journalists here as professionals, he said the administration of the media was also exemplary as it did not ignore the development of the country while pursuing journalistic ideals.

The week that was also saw a debate raging in the local media on the

merits of the reclamation work in the Tebrau Straits.

Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian probably gave Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad the last word on the issue with their page 1 lead stories yesterday quoting the Prime Minister as asking Singapore for a guarantee that the reclamation will not affect the waterline.

Dr Mahathir said while Singapore has the right to reclaim land in its territory, this should not be at the expense of Malaysia.

Singapore was also in Malaysian news for other reasons.

Utusan Malaysia ran a story on Monday quoting statistics published in The Straits Times which indicated that more poor children in the republic were not going to school.

A total of 1,921 children were not registered for Primary One in 1999 as parents did not have enough money to pay school fees, the newspaper said, quoting Education Ministry and welfare department figures.