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S'pore-Media

GOH'S PRESS SECRETARY PLAYS THE BALANCING ACT

SINGAPORE, Feb 25 (Bernama) --"Stop the Dr Mahathir-bashing" was the message that Burhan Gafoor, Press Secretary to Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong was trying to convey to the Singapore media in his letter published in the Sunday Times, headed, "Let's Reply With Dignity".

Burhan was referring to an article by Straits Times writer, Paul Jacob, headlined "We sayang you too, Dr Mahathir", published at a time when Goh was getting ready to fly to Malaysia for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Kuala Lumpur.

The writer, in a vitriolic open letter to Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last Saturday, asked Dr Mahathir: "Tell me, is it a requirement to be an entertainer to qualify for politics?" and remarked "There are very few of your kind around. It is a vanishing breed."

In a prominent rejoinder, Burhan said: "The article was in poor taste. It is an example of the type of articles that the media, on both sides of the Causeway, should avoid. Whatever others may say about us, it is better to reply in a dignified manner and set the record straight by stating the facts."

Indeed it was bad timing. It came just before Goh left for Kuala Lumpur to meet Dr Mahathir

Observers said the media from both sides of the Causeway, had been going into overdrive over the water issue and the disputed island of Pulau Batu Puteh, or Pedra Branca, as Singapore calls it.

Malaysia was furious when Singapore made public letters between Malaysian and Singapore leaders, with the Singapore media having a field day reporting every detail. Malaysia cried foul over the release of the letters, saying that Singapore had not acted in good faith.

The verbal spats between both sides dragged on. Even the signing of a special agreement to refer the dispute over the sovereignty issue of Pulau Batu Puteh to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) was marred by a lengthy argument and counter-argument between Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and his Singapore counterpart, S.Jayakumar.

Then, Dr Mahathir visited Johor Baharu, and revealed that Goh had opposed the building of a new bridge to link both countries, because the latter was nostalgic over the Causeway.

It was a quick response from the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), spokesman, who called Dr Mahathir a great story teller. The Singapore media reported it.

"Till that point, the script was running along expected lines. But over the weekend, there was an unexpected twist", Joy Frances wrote in Today, a tabloid owned by MediaCorp Press.

"It was an overzealously anti-Mahathir commentary. It immediately invited a reaction from the press secretary of Mr Goh," said Frances in a front-page story headlined: 'Media Catch-22.'

Vice-Dean of the Nanyang Technological University's School of Communication and Information, Dr Ang Peng Hua told Today: Malaysian politicians like Dr Mahathir see ST (Straits Times) as being the voice of the Singapore government."

"Malaysians do see our papers as toeing the official line and this is probably why (the government) here wanted to distance itself from the article," said Dr Ang.

Media consultant Margaret Thomas, former Deputy Editor of the Business

Times said: "This is the price the government pays for having such a strong backing for the paper. ST will still be seen as reflecting the party line in some way and Singapore too will be judged by it", she was quoted as saying in Today.

In this case, the timing was especially bad.

Wrote, Frances: "Coming, as it did, just after the spats over Pedra Branca and the water issue, and just before Goh left for Kuala Lumpur to meet Dr Mahathir, the article could have cast a chill over that meeting if the Malaysians had perceived the article as a barometer of what the Singapore government wanted to convey."

Said Dr Ang: "Now, the chilling effect could be on the local media. "I think you will be seeing fewer of these kinds of commentaries and I think that was the intention," he predicted. "The government would want to cool down the heat and the exchange of words."

Paul Jacob, the man in the eye of the storm, told Today: "I am not losing any sleep over it."

The question is will there be less of such commentaries after the NAM summit?

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