

**Sabah DCM quits
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Sabah Deputy Chief Minister Chong Kah Kiat tendered his shock resignation today which is said to be related to his long-standing differences with Chief Minister Musa Aman.

According to sources, the 59-year-old politician had made the decision based on "a matter of principle".

Chong, one of the state's three deputy chief ministers and minister of environment and tourism, had an audience with the Yang di-Pertua Negeri Sabah this morning to hand in his letter of resignation.

The resignation will take effect on April 16.

The former Sabah Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) president served as a state minister for eight years, including two years as chief minister before Musa took over in 2003 under the rotation system.

Chong also held a federal post as minister in the Prime Minister's Department from 1995 to 1999. He resigned from the post to contest in the Sabah state election.

Musa, who was recently accused of a litany of corrupt practices, when met in Kuala Lumpur this evening refused to respond to queries on his alleged rift with Chong.

Final straw

In a five-paragraph statement distributed to the media in Kota Kinabalu, Chong thanked all Malaysians in Sabah who have given him their unstinting support and understanding over the years.

He also expressed gratitude to the media, adding: "Please accept my apologies if I have had at any time offended any of you in the course of my work."

However, the statement made no mention of Musa.

Sources told malaysiakini that ties have been strained between the chief minister and his deputy for some time and the final straw was their differences over Chong's proposal to build a huge statue of the Goddess of Mercy in Kudat as a tourist attraction.

The proposal was not only rejected but Chong was also allegedly told that Umno Sabah, headed by Musa, could ignore him because LDP was a mosquito party, added the sources.

It is learnt that the two have not been seeing eye-to-eye since the time Chong was chief minister and had rejected certain projects mooted by Musa, who was then finance minister.

Sources said Musa also viewed his estranged deputy as standing in the way of his plan to develop the popular Pulau Sipadan island (photo, below) off Sabah's east coast.

Final straw

Chong expressed reservation over the plan, which has also been opposed by federal authorities, due to the possibility of it damaging the environment.

When asked at today's press conference if his decision was related to differences with the chief minister, Chong remained silent.

However, sources said his resignation does not come as a surprise since many had anticipated it.

The question now, they added, was how the Chinese leaders in other Barisan Nasional component parties would react to this development.

Chong stepped down as LDP president last year allowing lawyer VK Liew to take over.

In an immediate reaction, Bernard Dompok - who is minister in the Prime Minister's Department and leader of Sabah's United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (Upko) - said he respected Chong's decision.

"Chong has brought to the Sabah state cabinet a wealth of experience both as a minister and as a political leader," he said.

"The state would have stood to benefit from his experience for the remainder of his term but since he has resigned, as reported on a matter of principle, we would have to respect his decision. Upko wish him all the best."

At a press conference in Kuala Lumpur this evening, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said he did not think Chong's resignation was a loss and the Sabah government would not be weakened by this.

He said Chong did not give any reason for the resignation and he had heard about it from Musa.

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