

Kuan Yew: I'm sorry

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KUALA LUMPUR: Singapore Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew has told Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that he was sorry for the "discomfort" caused by comments he made about how Malaysia treats its minority Chinese.

Lee said that after a decade of troubled relations with Abdullah's predecessor (Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad) it was the last thing he wanted.

"I am sorry that what I said has caused you a great deal of discomfort. After a decade of troubled relations with your predecessor, it is the last thing I wanted," he said in a letter dated Sept 29 and forwarded to the Foreign Ministry by Singapore High Commissioner T. Jasudasan yesterday.

"I had no intention to meddle in your politics. Indeed, I do not have the power to influence Malaysia's politics or to incite the feelings of the Chinese in Malaysia."

A copy of the three-page letter was provided by the Singapore High Commission here last night.

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Lee wants to maintain good relations with Abdullah

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Abdullah had written to Lee on Sept 25 seeking clarification over the latter's controversial remarks that the attitude of Malaysia and Indonesia towards the republic was shaped by the way they treated their Chinese communities.

Lee thanked Abdullah for the letter and said he made the remarks in a free-flowing dialogue session with former US Secretary of Treasury Larry Summers before many foreign delegates attending the IMF/WB meeting on Sept 15.

He also included in the letter the transcript of the rele-

vant passage as reported by Reuters.

He said that on the bridge and the half bridge to remove the Causeway, Abdullah made the position of the Malaysian government clear that Malaysia respected legally binding agreements and acted in accordance with international law.

"This made unnecessary a reference to ITLOS (International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea) and the International Court of Justice that would otherwise have been unavoidable. This respect for the law is the basis for sound, long-term relations between us," he said.

Lee said he was explaining to a

liberal audience of westerners who wanted to see a stronger opposition in Singapore why the republic needed a strong majority government, not a weak coalition that would hamper it in defending its national interests.

"Singapore needs a strong government to maintain good relations with Indonesia and Malaysia and to interact with Indonesian and Malaysian politicians who consider Singapore to be Chinese and expect Singapore to be 'sensitive' and comply with their requests," he said.

Lee also pointed out in his letter that Malaysian politicians including Dr Mahathir and many others had publicly

warned Malaysian Malays that if they ever lost power, they risked the same fate as Malays in Singapore, whom they alleged were marginalised and discriminated against.

He added that from time to time when Malaysian politicians attacked Singapore fiercely over some bilateral issue but some of them told the republic's politicians privately to just accept that as a part of Malaysian politics and not to react to those attacks.

"Singapore understands the reality of Malaysian politics. We have never protested at these attacks on our multi-racial system or our policies, except to cla-

rify our own position when necessary.

"But we have to explain to our people the root cause of these difficulties in our bilateral relations.

"Otherwise Singaporeans will believe that their own government is doing wrong either to our own people or to Malaysia.

"As for the international audience, with so many foreign embassy staff and foreign correspondents reporting on Singapore and Malaysia, plus tens of thousands of expatriate businessmen working in our two countries, these people will come to their own judgement of the true posi-

tion regardless of what I say," he added.

Lee also pointed out that this was not the first time he had made similar remarks and "in fact I have said less than what I had written in my memoirs published in 1998."

The former Singapore premier said since Abdullah took over as Prime Minister, the relations between the two countries had improved.

Lee also attached a postscript to his letter informing Abdullah that he would be releasing the letter to the media.

■ Lee Kuan Yew's letter
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