

Fate may be known today

NST - 8/2/2006

PM to study reply to show-cause letter

■ By Deborah Loh
news@nst.com.my

PUTRAJAYA, Tues. — The reprinting of offensive caricatures of Prophet Muhammad in the *Sarawak Tribune* was the act of one person who has resigned, and further action against the newspaper will be decided by the Prime Minister.

Three of the daily's top managers were summoned to the Internal Security Ministry this afternoon, where they met Deputy Minister Datuk Noh Omar for two hours.

The three were the paper's editorial adviser, Senator Datuk Idris Buang, who is also chief political secretary to Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, Group Editor Toman Mamora, and Executive Editor Polit Hamzah.

They submitted a written reply to a show-cause letter from the ministry and explained the incident to Noh.

Noh declined to comment on the newspaper's explanation and said he would present their written reply and a report on the discussion for Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's consideration.

It is learnt that Abdullah is likely to raise the matter at the Cabinet meeting tomorrow before announcing his decision on the paper.

The possible courses of action under the Printing Presses and Publications Act are an admonition, a warning, temporary suspension of the daily's permit, or a revocation of the permit. The daily has over 300 staff.

Speaking to reporters later,

Idris refuted calls for more of the paper's editors to take responsibility by resigning.

He said the blame rested solely on Lester Melanyi, the night editor in charge of the Saturday edition that carried the caricatures.

According to Idris, Melanyi apparently had not regarded reprinting the caricatures as a sensitive matter as the accompanying captions were in a foreign language and could not be understood.

Idris said the daily would abide by Abdullah's decision and thanked Noh and Internal Security officials for being professional and objective in handling the case.

Excerpts from Idris' Press conference:

Q: Was it a careless mistake, a breach of editorial procedures?

A: He slipped it in, he beat the system. He more or less "curi-lah" (stole the opportunity). He inserted it right before the crucial time, right before printing. Nobody had the chance to stop it.

Q: Was it intentional?

A: It was intentional on his part, as he said in his own words, he did not see the sensitivity because the accompanying remarks to the caricatures were not readable, but that he wanted to support the story which was from Islamabad (foreign news wires).

Q: How could it be so easy for him to do that?



HOPEFUL: Idris (right) and Mamora leaving the Internal Security Ministry.

A: We have a system where everybody (other editors) has to check. There were nine editorial staff below him, of whom eight were Muslims, but none of them got a chance to see that page.

Q: Was there a bad motive on his part?

A: I don't have the power to interrogate him on that. It's also very dangerous to speculate. But I feel upset, just like other Muslims. I am also a Muslim.

Q: What about calls by Umno Youth that the group editor and other top management should resign?

A: If one person is guilty, should the rest be punished along with him? Umno Youth has its own stand, but more importantly, the truth must prevail. Our internal inquiry focused on only one person. It's a straightforward case, there were no accomplices. Melanyi has apologised and we wanted to sack him, but he said he would resign immediately. We accepted.

Q: What do you anticipate the Government's action to be?

A: I believe the Government is very sympathetic to the *Sarawak Tribune*. I believe

the Government will be very fair. This is also a test for Muslims here ... to show the world that we are civilised and that we can have mutual respect. We will wait and accept whatever the Government's decision is.

Meanwhile, Umno Youth International Bureau deputy head Datuk Sazmi Miah filed a police report at the Putrajaya police station this afternoon against the *Sarawak Tribune*, charging the paper with having a "hidden agenda".

A protest note over the daily's action was also sent to Noh by student group Gabungan Mahasiswa Islam Se-Malaysia (GAMIS)