



KEEPING VIGIL: Members of the police Light Strike Force monitoring the situation outside the Sarawak Tribune office in Kuching, after several demonstrators held a protest over the daily's publication of caricatures of Prophet Muhammad.

SUSPENDED

Cabinet freezes daily's publishing permit indefinitely

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KUCHING, Wed. — The inevitable happened today. The Cabinet decided to suspend the licence of the *Sarawak Tribune* indefinitely

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ly for reproducing controversial caricatures of Prophet Muhammad. The newspaper becomes the fourth publication in the country's history to have its permit to publish suspended, after *The Star*, *Watan* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* during Operation Lalang in 1987. There

was an air of inevitability about the decision, because race and religion have been out-of-bounds for the media as long as the *Negaraku* has been sung. Also weighing against the newspaper

Police begin probe into Tribune case



UNCERTAIN FUTURE: Some staff members of the *Sarawak Tribune* waiting outside the office in Jalan Abell, Kuching, yesterday, uncertain of what will happen to them. — NST picture by Nadim Bokhari

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was the fact that the publication of the cartoons had triggered widespread condemnation and protests across the world long before the Saturday the *Tribune* reprinted the caricatures.

The suspension was also on the cards because there had been a growing clamour among ministers and politicians for the media to be reined in. Uncomfortable with the freedom and space that newspapers have been given since the general election in 2004, they have campaigned for tighter controls.

The mistakes by the *Sarawak Tribune*, and the *China Press* in wrongly identifying the woman in

the nude squat controversy, were cited as examples of a Press out of control.

The *New Straits Times* understands that the suspension is in effect pending the outcome of a probe by the Internal Security Ministry.

Cabinet members today unanimously agreed with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that the reproduction of the offensive cartoons was a serious offence which demanded stern action from the Government.

Sources told the NST that the Cabinet also felt the incident should be thoroughly investigated as a criminal offence.

"I think the police will be con-

ducting an in-depth investigation into this matter, and if necessary legal action will be instituted against individuals directly involved," an informed source said.

Sarawak Tribune editorial adviser Datuk Idris Buang said he had no knowledge of the Cabinet decision. "I don't know anything yet," he said.

Police sources here also confirmed that they have begun investigations into the matter and had recorded an initial statement from the daily's editor who resigned.

"We will also be talking to others in the *Sarawak Tribune* to ascertain what actually happened. I cannot say anything more," a senior police officer said.

Meanwhile, employees at the daily said action should only be taken against those responsible for the cartoons being reproduced.

The *Tribune*, whose two printing plants are in Kuching and Bintulu has a daily circulation of about 25,000 and a staff strength of about 300. It also has branch offices in Sibu, Miri and Bintulu.

The saga took an unexpected twist yesterday when editor Lester Melanyi denied that he had resigned of his own accord and that he had been solely responsible for the reproduction of the caricatures.

He accused his superiors of not telling the whole truth and claimed he was being made a scapegoat.