

Memo withdrawn

The Star - 22/1/2006

The matter is now closed, says the Prime Minister

BY SA'ODAH ELIAS

KUALA LUMPUR: The memorandum to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has been withdrawn.

And as far as the Prime Minister is concerned, the matter is closed.

The retraction of the document signed by nine non-Muslim Cabinet ministers calling for a review of laws affecting the rights of non-Muslims was made during a meeting between Abdullah and five of the signatories at Seri Perdana in Putrajaya yesterday.

They were Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting; Transport Minister Datuk Seri Chan Kong Choy; Health Minister Datuk Dr Chua Soi Lek; Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu; and Energy, Water and Communications Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik.

"I met them and I told them that they need to retract the memorandum and they all agreed. I hope the memorandum will no longer be an issue from now on," said the Prime Minister.

Abdullah, who is Umno president, told newsmen after launching an Umno recruitment campaign that he considered the issue closed and urged everyone particularly politicians to stop harping on it.

There should no longer be any debate on whether it was right or wrong, fitting or otherwise, in send-

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ing the memorandum, he said.

"We don't want this to remain an issue because the parties who sent me the memorandum have already withdrawn it.

"They understand the views expressed by others over the sending of the memorandum and that is why when I asked them to retract it, they agreed," he said.

Abdullah said the only sensitive part of the whole chapter that stirred emotions among various parties was the act of sending the memorandum, and now that the ministers have taken it back, "it is over."

But this does not mean that the subject of the memorandum could not be discussed at Cabinet meetings, he stressed.

MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting welcomed the Prime Minister's assurance that the issue would be addressed by the Cabinet.

"We will give our input on the issue of conversion (to Islam). We agree that there should be continued discussion on legal and constitutional issues which concern the rights of non-Muslims," he said in a joint statement with three other MCA ministers.

Gerakan president Datuk Seri Lim Keng Yaik said the meeting with Abdullah was necessary because the press has made the matter concerning the memorandum a "hot issue".

"We explained that the joint memorandum was meant to give him our input on the views and concerns of non-Muslims," he said in a statement. MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu said the MIC "really appreciate the advice and views of the Prime Minister and will adhere to his decision."

Abdullah said the Cabinet was willing to discuss any issue, however sensitive, because "our main aim is to safeguard the interests of the people and the country."

He affirmed that all Cabinet members have equal right to speak on and raise any issue, and there was no restriction on any minister. "We are one team," he said.

The issue of the rights of non-Muslims stemmed from the Syariah court declaration that former commando M. Moorthy @ Muhammad Abdullah who died last month was a Muslim.

The widow challenged the finding at the High Court, but the High Court ruled that it would not interfere with the Syariah court's declaration.

Asked whether action would be taken against the signatories of the memorandum, a clearly upset Abdullah retorted: "You want them suspended ... let us expel and have a reshuffle, is that what you want? Come on, enough is enough."

SundayStar