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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak has instructed his lawyers to take action against *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* over their reports allegedly linking him to a bribery scandal.

In a statement yesterday, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) slammed the two Australian publications over their July 14 article titled, "Bribery scandal linked to Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak".

The report allegedly claimed that between 1999 and 2004, Malaysian officials received bribes to secure contracts to turn the ringgit from paper notes to polymer.

It claimed that the Australian government was aware of intelligence implicating individuals in the offices of Najib, as well as former prime minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The report also claimed that Malaysia had ignored a formal mutual assistance request from the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department to hand over sensitive information about the finan-

cial dealings of a group of Malaysian middlemen in the case.

PMO said the prime minister had rejected the report's "baseless smears and insinuations" and was taking possible legal action against the two publications.

"This is a desperate attempt to link the work he (Najib) did when he was deputy prime minister — which involved countless trade missions to promote Malaysia abroad, and meeting many thousands of people — with the alleged wrongdoings of middlemen, who may have happened to have been in the same room as him at some time or another.

"The article does not contain a single direct allegation about the prime minister — and for good reason. There is none to be made and there is not one shred of evidence that the prime minister was in any way involved. In the case that the courts have already made judgments on, with individuals convicted and punished," the statement read.

PMO said although Fairfax Media, which owns the two publications, are aware of the lack of evidence against Najib, it nevertheless attempted to mislead and imply not only his involvement, but that he was the beneficiary of an alleged wrongdoing.

"Instead of providing evidence to link the prime minister to the case, the article relies heavily on a series of slippery, non-conclusive words — "suspected", "alleged", "suggesting" — to lead the reader into thinking that the prime minister is guilty by association.

"This is grossly defamatory, and this sly and underhand way of attempting to tarnish the prime minister's name is underlined by the

fact that Australian court records quoted in the article state that "none of the named persons (including Mr Najib and Mr Badawi) is a person whom the accused are alleged to have conspired to bribe," said the statement.

The PMO questioned why Najib was linked to the allegations, as the Australian report had claimed that the prosecution case had alleged that "overseas central bank officials, rather than any ministers, were bribed between 1999 and 2004".

PMO also questioned why the report chose not to mention former premier Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, as some of the alleged wrongdoings took place during his tenure as prime minister.

"This is a case that has been ongoing for a long period of time, and the bribes alleged to have been paid were over the period of 1999 to 2004, during the administrations of former prime ministers Tun Abdullah Badawi and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"Yet, Fairfax Media chose not to mention Tun Dr Mahathir anywhere in its article. This is despite knowing that the alleged bribes took place not during Prime Minister Najib's tenure,

but during Tun Dr Mahathir's; and despite Tun Dr Mahathir being named in the suppression order regarding the case obtained by the Australian government.

"Instead, the entire article, including its headline and photos, focuses on and smears Prime Minister Najib. It may not be coincidental that Fairfax Media claims to have separate information from "high-level sources".

PMO said it was worth noting that an order preventing the release of

information about this investigation was criminally flouted by WikiLeaks.

"An Australian judge is quoted as saying that this was a clear and deliberate breach of law', and that the accompanying WikiLeaks press release was 'full of sensational, inaccurate allegations'.

"The same description could be used to characterise Fairfax Media's article, which is deliberately misleading, malicious and defamatory."

'Happy birthday, NST'

KUALA LUMPUR: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak took to Twitter to join the chorus of well-wishers for the *New Straits Times*, which celebrated its 170th anniversary yesterday.

"Happy 170th birthday NST. Your history is intertwined with our nation's progress. This national icon will grow stronger with age. #nst170."

The first edition of the NST was

published on July 15, 1845, as *The Straits Times* and the *Singapore Journal of Commerce*.

It is the country's oldest newspaper, having started out as a weekly before becoming a daily in 1931, and renamed the *New Straits Times*.

After 160 years of broadsheet publication, the NST changed its format to tabloid size on April 18, 2005.