

Apologise for paid-for interviews, Guan Eng tells PMO
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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 12 — Lim Guan Eng today demanded the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) apologise for paying RM84 million to a UK publicity firm to polish the Najib administration's image through news programmes.

"Datuk Seri Najib Razak should direct his Prime Minister's Office (PMO) to apologise for paying RM84 million to burnish the Najib administration's image... just as the BBC is apologising for accepting payments in exchange for a positive image for countries with a poor record of democratic practices and corruption," said the DAP secretary-general in a statement here.

The BCC has pledged to apologise for airing paid-for programmes that were favourable to some countries, including Malaysia.

UK daily The Independent reported yesterday the BBC will apologise to an estimated 74 million people around the world for a news-fixing scandal in which it aired as documentaries programmes that had been paid for in a deal with London-based publicity firm, FBC Media.

According to The Independent, the global apology by BBC is expected to read: "A small number of programmes broadcast on BBC World News between February 2009 and July 2011 broke BBC rules aimed at protecting our editorial integrity.

"These rules ensure that programmes are free, and are seen to be free, from commercial or other outside pressures."

Making a direct reference to the FBC documentaries, it will say: "In the case of eight other programmes, all of which featured Malaysia, we found that the production company which made the programmes appeared to have a financial relationship with the Malaysian government.

The BBC Trust's Editorial Standards Committee carried out an investigation into BBC World News in November and uncovered 15 breaches of editorial guidelines.

Eight of the breaches related to FBC programmes made about Malaysia due to an apparent "financial relationship" between the government and FBC Media, the TV production company.

The Independent pointed out that FBC Media made eight pieces for the BBC about Malaysia while failing to declare it was paid £17million (RM84 million) by the Malaysian government for "global strategic communications" that included positive coverage of Malaysia's controversial palm oil industry.

The apology will be broadcast worldwide on the BBC's World News channel to an estimated 295 million homes, 1.7 million hotel rooms, 81 cruise ships, 46 airlines and on 35 mobile phone platforms at four different times, staged in order to reach audiences in different time zones, the paper reported.

"This has also been confirmed by PM Najib Razak who last year admitted in a written parliamentary reply that the government had paid RM83.8 million to media consultancy company FBC Media for the duration of three years from 2007 for 'consultancy services, advice and management of a communication campaign'.

"This was as part of a contract between the Prime Minister's Office and FBC Media that was signed in 2007 and renewed twice," added Lim today, who said that news of Malaysia's involvement in the matter had "embarrassed" the country.

FBC Media and its parent company, FBC Group, went into administration last year — a legal term that allows a company facing bankruptcy to carry on business — following reports it accepted £17million from Putrajaya to burnish the Najib administration's image on global broadcast networks.

FBC was set up in 1998 by award-winning US journalist Alan Friedman and other prominent media individuals who built a network of blue-chip clients that included the governments of Greece, Italy and Zambia, with contracts to promote tourism in Malaysia, Indonesia and Hungary.

FBC has been exposed to have also doubled up as a publicity firm for the Najib government and was paid millions of pounds to conduct a "global strategic communications campaign".

But Putrajaya ended its RM96 million contract with FBC, which started in 2009, after it was revealed Malaysian government leaders regularly appeared in paid-for-TV programmes.

The Malaysian Insider has reported of PM Najib contracting a series of public relations strategists, including APCO Worldwide, to polish his personal image and his government's locally and worldwide.

APCO's time in Malaysia was marked by controversy after the opposition alleged the public relations firm was linked to Israel.

The most recent hire are members of the team behind former British PM Tony Blair's "New Labour" campaign, who were reported to have started work to reinvent Najib as a moderate reformist.

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