

Teng Cheong raps Straits Times and New Nation

THE Communications and Labour Minister, Mr Ong Teng Cheong, has criticised The Straits Times and its sister paper, New Nation, for what he described as their "irresponsible, misleading and rumour-mongering" reports on bus fare increases and a recent seizure of video-tapes.

He said The Straits Times, by publishing on Oct 27 a "grossly inaccurate" report about an expected all-round five-cent increase in bus fares and a hike of up to \$10 in the cost of a concession pass, misled the public in a highly irresponsible manner.

And New Nation, by headlining a Nov 12 report "Dialect tapes seized", gave the public the misleading impression that the government was acting specifically against dialect videotapes when the seizure was part of a continuous police action against uncensored tapes.

Triggered

Accusing English-language newspapers of "playing games", Mr Ong, who is MP for Kim Keat, said they had failed in their basic duty of informing their readers accurately.

He made these remarks when he spoke in Mandarin to several Chinese newspaper reporters after a kindergarten graduation ceremony held in the auditorium of Pei Dao Secondary School within his constituency on Sunday.

Reporters from the English-language newspapers were not present. Nor was there any journalist from the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation.

His criticism was triggered off by a question from a Nanyang Siang Pau reporter, Mr Li Hsiao Lin.

Mr Li had asked if the Singapore Bus Service's decision to call in foreign transport experts to help plan for the future would affect the government's decision on the proposed Mass Rapid Transit project.

The minister replied that the two matters were not related. Then, putting aside his elaboration on this subject, he started talking about The Straits Times and New Nation.

He referred to what he described as a "headline" report in The Straits Times at the end of October about bus fare hikes.

At this point, Mr Li pointed out that his paper, Nanyang Siang Pau, had published something on that even before The Straits Times did.

Although Mr Li did not elaborate, he was evidently referring to a front page report the Chinese daily carried on Oct 21, complete with a bold banner headline in black characters against a red background.

Reliable

That report said, among other things, that bus fares would go up at the end of the year or early next year by no more than 10 cents and that they, like utility charges, would be adjusted periodically.

Quoting reliable sources, it said also that one option open to the SBS in its latest round of increases was to leave the fare structure intact but increase the costs of concession passes.

Another was to increase fares but not alter the number of fare stages covered by each of them.

Mr Ong did not react to Mr Li's reference to the Nanyang's front page splash but dealt instead with The Straits Times report of Oct 27, which appeared as a single-column article on Page One under the byline of transport reporter Edmund Teo.

Mr Ong said there was no basis at all to The Straits Times report,

which he described as misleading and irresponsible. It pained and angered him, he said.

Though The Straits Times had maintained that the report was accurate at the time of writing, his view was that the newspaper had failed in its basic duty of informing its readers accurately.

He then cited as another example of a failure of newspapers, their inadequate education of readers about the Central Provident Fund's Home Protection Insurance Scheme. Here he included the Chinese newspapers in his criticism.

Returning to the subject of bus fares, he said the government indicated in March that there would be a second round of minor adjustments after the increases in May.

But New Nation, in the third week of October, and The Straits Times, a few days later, still carried "headline" reports about the expected increases.

The New Nation report Mr Ong referred to appeared as a front page lead article on Oct 21 under reporter Rav Dhaliwal's byline.

Quoting sources too, she reported that the SBS was studying two proposals.

Same report

The first was a three-denomination fare system of 40 cents, 60 cents and 80 cents, compared with the present one of five different fares. The other proposal was an all-round increase of five cents.

Two Chinese papers, the Shin Min Daily and the Min Pao, carried similar reports the next day. The Straits Times report which followed five days later was Edmund Teo's story.

He also quoted sources as saying that full fare paying passengers could expect an all-round five-cent increase while concession holders might have to pay \$1 to \$10 more.

His report was, in turn, followed by similar reports in three Chinese papers the next day — the Shin Min, Min Pao and Sin Chew Jit Poh.

Scoop

Mr Ong said The Straits Times report gave the people a completely unfounded impression that there would be an all-round five-cent increase in fares and that concession holders would have to pay \$10 more.

If reporters wanted a scoop, he said, they should write about how, this time round, the fare increases would be minimal.

The SBS did not have the proposals Edmund Teo wrote about, and the Communications Ministry had not seen them.

When a Chinese newspaper reporter present told Mr Ong that Edmund Teo had maintained that he had checked and was convinced at the time he wrote his report that it was accurate, the minister said: "Rubbish."

Though he could not give details about the fare increases, he could say that the proposals were far less than what were reported.

The increases were not even half of what The Straits Times reported, he said. An official announcement is expected in a week or two.

Mr Ong then told the reporters present they could report him as condemning The Straits Times for rumour-mongering and failing in its duty of informing the people accurately.

Turning to the Nov 12 New Nation report on the seizure of video-tapes, he said the truth of the matter was that the police, as part of their continuous action against uncensored tapes, recently seized a large quantity, among

them dialect tapes.

But the misleading New Nation headline made it appear as if the government was taking specific action against dialect tapes.

This, to him, was an indication that the English papers were showing an increasing tendency to "play games."

He did not elaborate on what he meant but returned instead to the subject of foreign experts for SBS and the MRT project.

GROUP EDITOR'S COMMENT:

WE are shocked, of course, by the statements Mr Ong has chosen to make against the English-language press, in particular against The Straits Times and New Nation.

Yesterday we re-examined the circumstances surrounding the three stories Mr Ong criticised. We asked ourselves:

HAVE we been irresponsible? We read another newspaper's page one lead story on Oct 21, and both New Nation and The Straits Times took pains to check the facts before publishing reports on the same subject.

New Nation reported the same afternoon that SBS was studying two proposals. The Straits Times reported six days later that two forms of increases were under active consideration.

If New Nation and The Straits Times were to name their sources, no one, not even Mr Ong, we think, would feel that the two newspapers had been irresponsible.

Unfortunately, the ethics of our profession prevent us from naming sources who declined to be named.

We are not saying and we do not believe that Mr Ong was not telling the truth when he said that he had not seen such proposals from SBS.

But, believe us, New Nation and The Straits Times made the checks and took reasonable steps to ensure that what they were going to publish was fact and not rumour or speculation.

SBS was considering those proposals, we were told by responsible people we had no reason to doubt.

Now the question we ask ourselves is: Why has the Minister not been told about SBS thinking at the time?

Unintended

HAVE we started rumours, misled the people and confused them? We did not start the rumours, if they can be called rumours, because we were not the first and only newspaper to report last month, on impending bus fare increases.

New Nation's unintended linking of the action against uncensored videotapes to the Speak Mandarin campaign was most unfortunate. But it was not part of the alleged "tendency of playing games."

The tapes seized included those containing Cantonese television films; as background the New Nation report mentioned the Speak Mandarin campaign, and the headline focused on what was thought to be the newswiest point.

The social and political implications of such linkage were not realised, particularly when the police action had nothing to do with the Speak Mandarin campaign.

New Nation did not hesitate the very next day to clarify its report and express regret.

We believe it is not possible to find one newspaper anywhere, which has not made a mistake or created a wrong impression unwittingly.

Let us remember that it is not possible to find a single person who has not erred.

So why has the English-language press been singled out for such criticism?

We are sad too, like Mr Ong. But we hope we will be able to clear up the misunderstanding that obviously exists. — PETER H. L. LIM

The weather

UP TO 1 p.m. TODAY: Cloudy With Occasional Light Rain In The Early Morning. TEMP. (C) up to 6 a.m. tomorrow: 31 max., 24 min. SUNSET today: 6.21 p.m.; SUNRISE tomorrow: 6.18 a.m.

● Global Weather delayed.

**TENG CHEONG MEETS
THE PRESS AND...**

**Authoritative
sources prove
unreliable**



MR ONG

By **LESLIE FONG** Deputy Editor

STRAITS Times group editor, Mr Peter H.L. Lim, yesterday maintained that the sources who provided information for two recent reports on bus fare increases were authoritative but conceded that they were now proven unreliable.

This was the upshot of an hour-long discussion between him and Communications Minister, Mr Ong Teng Cheong, in what turned out to be a most unusual press conference.

Mr Lim reiterated that The Straits Times and New Nation had acted responsibly and had taken pains to check the facts before publication.

The newspapers, he said, relied on sources who were not only authoritative but also had direct access to proposals relating to fare increases.

Those were sources who had been reliable with information concerning the Singapore Bus Service on previous occasions. There was no reason to doubt them — until yesterday afternoon.

Handicap

If the newspapers erred, they erred in good faith, for they were depending on the integrity of the sources.

Mr Lim said that his handicap was that he could not, in defence of the newspapers, name the sources as this would constitute a serious breach of journalistic ethics.

But in view of certain revelations at yesterday's meeting, he would return to Times House, play a tape-recording of the discussion and leave it to New Nation reporter Rav Dhaliwal and her Straits Times colleague Edmund Teo to decide whether they now felt free to name their sources.

They should consider such a course of action, because their sources had let them down, perhaps even made use of them for whatever reason, and lacked the moral courage to own up in the face of accusations of irresponsibility and rumour-mongering against their newspapers.

Last night, both reporters decided not to name their sources, a decision

fully endorsed by Mr Lim and their editors. (See columns 7 and 8).

Earlier, at the press conference, the situation was summed up by Mr Sim Kee Boon, Permanent Secretary (Communications), in an aside: "You have been taken for a ride."

The press conference was called by Mr Ong in response to The Straits Times back page report yesterday on his criticism of The Straits Times and New Nation and Mr Lim's comment that the English-language press should not have been singled out.

The minister said he stood by his condemnation of New Nation's report on Oct 21, which said the SBS was considering an all-round five-cent fare increase and a three-tier fare system, and The Straits Times report of Oct 27 about the five-cent increase and a proposal to raise the cost of concession passes by between \$1 and \$10.

Mr Ong maintained that there was absolutely no basis to those reports. What irked him was the insistence that the sources were reliable.

He said the important point was how reliable the sources were. He noted that Mr Lim had said there could be no disclosure of the sources.

Forwarded

On his part, he brought along to the press conference "all the reliable sources you can lay your hands on."

These were the officials who had access to the fare increase proposals submitted to the ministry by SBS and, in turn, forwarded to the Cabinet with minor changes.

Apart from Mr Sim, they were, from the SBS, Messrs Tan Kong Eng, managing director, Lim Leong Geok, executive director, and Mah Bow Tan, general manager, and, from the ministry, Messrs Ho Cheok Sun, director (land transport division), and Jaspal Singh, assistant director in the same division.

In response to questions, Mr Tan said the SBS had never considered the five-cent increase proposal. The thought had not even entered his mind or that of his colleagues present.

They had considered increasing the costs of concession passes but the range was not the \$1 to \$10 reported by The Straits Times.

The three-tier fare system was first mentioned in the 1980 SBS annual report, and was no more than a long-term proposal for the future.

Mr Tan was asked about a front page report in the Oct 21 Nanyang Siang Pau, which said, among other things, that the fare increase would not exceed 10 cents.

He said that as that could mean anything from "zero cent to 10 cents," an increase falling within that range was possible, especially as past records showed

★ See Back Page: Col. 4



MR LIM



MR TAN

**'I am sorry but
I'm also proud
of our reporters'**

GROUP EDITOR Peter Lim said last night that he was proud of the two reporters' decision not to name their sources, even though this was at some cost to their own credibility and the credibility of their newspapers.

"Rav Dhaliwal and Edmund Teo told me they took that decision for one reason and one reason only," Mr Lim said. "The general credibility of journalists is more important."

"They believe that, in this case, the public can judge for themselves. And they have enough faith in our readers to feel that they will not conclude we have made up those stories."

Why do journalists insist on the right to protect their sources? Because, without this journalistic principle, the flow of information is seriously threatened, according to Mr Lim.

Certainly, journalists can abuse this right and, in many countries, this right is not recognised by law or in practice. But without it, there cannot be

responsible journalism either.

In the case of The Straits Times Group and the bus fare increase stories, the two sources are still in responsible positions that make them authoritative people to talk to about SBS.

Although they had invariably proved reliable in the past, they have let down the two reporters and their newspapers this time. What was their motive?

"We can only speculate on that," Mr Lim said. "But there is no doubt it was highly irresponsible for them to have given our reporters information we now are convinced was not correct."

"We were misled, and our reports on Oct 21 and 27 misled our readers. We apologise to our readers and to Mr Ong Teng Cheong."

"It is unfortunate that our professional ethics prevent us from exposing those who misled us and also, I suspect, Nanyang Siang Pau in its report of Oct 21."

**Hepatitis
vaccine
licensed
for use
in US**

NEW YORK, Tues.

THE US Food and Drug Administration announced yesterday its approval of the first vaccine against hepatitis to be licensed for use in the United States.

The vaccine was the result of about 13 years of research and development by Merck Sharp and Dohme Research Laboratories.

It has been judged highly effective in protecting against hepatitis B virus, a major cause of liver disease throughout the world.

Of the 200,000 to 300,000 new liver infections in the US every year, about 56,000 cases are serious enough to involve jaundice and other effects, like nausea, fatigue and substantial liver damage. In a year, roughly 10,000 hospitalisations and 200 deaths occur.

Major problem

Hepatitis B virus is considered a major health problem in Africa and Asia and is believed to be a significant factor in liver cancer in these regions.

Liver cancer accounts for 20 to 40 per cent of all cancers in some regions of Africa and Asia.

In some Asian populations, as many as 20 or even 50 per cent of the population are carriers of the virus, according to Dr Maurice Hilleman, vice president for virus and cell biology research of Merck Sharp and Dohme Research Laboratories.

Because liver cancers in Asia seem closely linked to prior infection with the virus, some health experts have speculated that widespread use of a vaccine would bring major reductions in the toll of liver cancer there.

Liver cancer is relatively uncommon in the



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The reporter even read back story to check the facts

★ From Page One

that fare increases rarely went up to 20 cents.

Asked how he could then assert that a five-cent increase was never considered, he argued that this was because the range mentioned by the Chinese daily was "so big."

At this point, Mr Sim interrupted to say that the Nanyang report was more about a "theoretical possibility," to which the minister added the observation that Nanyang was, in any case, incorrect too.

'Definitive'

Mr Sim said that The Straits Times report by Edmund Teo was too definitive, and that when reporting a possible increase of \$1 to \$10 in the costs of concession passes, it was the figure of \$10 that would hit commuters.

Mr Lim said that, handicapped by his inability to name the sources, he could not prove the newspapers' case to Mr Ong or the public.

He could only say in all sincerity that he had gone into the matter at great length and, having cross-examined the reporters and watched their demeanour, he was satisfied that the sources were people in responsible positions.

It was possible, he went on, that these sources told the reporters one thing and somebody else something different altogether, and it was possible that the newspapers had been used by people to "fly certain kites or float certain trial balloons" to test public reaction.

The reasonable step Mr Teo took was to read back to

the sources what he had written.

Mr Ong said that though he did, from time to time, float ideas, this was invariably done in the form of speeches, never by talking privately to newspaper editors. Neither would officials in the ministry or SBS.

In this instance, the question of floating ideas did not arise as, he disclosed, the SBS submitted its proposals on the fare increases to the ministry in late September.

And the ministry, in turn, submitted them, with some minor changes, to the Cabinet on Oct 19, which was two days before the Nanyang and NN reports were published.

There was definitely nothing in the proposals about an all-round five-cent increase or an increase of up to \$10 in the costs of concession passes.

Stunned

Where the minister was concerned, this was how it was, unless the journalists present said he and his officials were unreliable and conspiring to lie.

To this, Mr Lim said he was now satisfied that the newspapers' two sources, though authoritative, were not reliable. He was still convinced that the reporters had taken pains to check their reports and he had no reason to doubt them.

He and his colleagues were stunned, shaken and shocked by Mr Ong's attacks which were directed against the English press only though Nanyang also carried a report on fare increases.

On this point, Mr Ong said that he left out mention of the Chinese newspapers when, in speaking to their

reporters on Sunday, he hit out at the ST and NN because he had already chastised Nanyang's chief editor, Mr Mok Lee Kwang, about its speculative reporting.

Yesterday The Straits Times reported that all Chinese newspapers carried stories on the impending bus fare increase last month.

Mr Ong went on to say that he had not opened up the issue earlier because he did not want it to be linked to the Anson by-election.

He did not want the government to come across as putting blame on The Straits Times or New Nation for the Anson defeat as the people's displeasure over pending fare increases was but only one of a whole host of factors accounting for it.

Now, when an official announcement about the increases was about to be made, and the increases were going to be minor, he did not want the public to gain the impression that the officials were all conspiring and had something to hide and that after the defeat in Anson, they reduced the proposed increases.

Apology

As the press conference drew to a close, and Mr Ong and his officials were about to get up and leave, Mr Sim appeared to be lost in thought.

Mr Lim asked him: "You have something else on your mind, Mr Sim?"

Mr Sim said he was wondering if The Straits Times, in its report of the press conference, intended to introduce an apology.

Mr Lim asked: "Is one called for?"

Mr Sim's view was that in the light of what had been established at the press conference, a note of apology might not be out of place.

Mr Lim's reply was that he would think about it and would give the suggestion his serious consideration.

The weather

UP TO 1 p.m. TODAY: Generally Fair.
TEMP. (C) up to 6 a.m. tomorrow: 31 max., 25 min. SUNSET today: 6.21 p.m.; SUNRISE