PM lauds Malay community for gotong-royong spirit

SINGAPORE – Praising the Malay community as a good example of what a strong “gotong-royong” spirit — a Malay expression to describe communal self-help — can achieve, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said yesterday that he hoped to see more groups actively mobilising themselves to come up with solutions for needy individuals in their midst.

This is so that all Singaporeans will be able to feel a sense of ownership and belonging at this turning point of the Republic’s development, said Mr Lee in his Malay National Day Rally speech.

He cited the passion and enthusiasm of the committee members and volunteers of a mosque upgrading project in raising funds, engaging residents and helping the needy, as well as how Malay-Muslim organisations are addressing socio-economic needs within the community — such as through the Family Excellence Circles programme, which supports low-income families to move up in life.

While he encouraged the Malay community to do more and make better use of the support from the Government, Mr Lee cautioned organisations “not to let competition turn unhealthy” and allow activism to result in race-based politics.

Earlier this year, former Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) board member Nizam Ismail resigned from the group. He alleged that the Government had threatened to cut AMP’s funding because of his comments online and his participation in two political events, a claim that was rebutted by Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim as well as AMP Chairman Azmoon Ahmad.

Dr Yaacob pointed out in response that money given by the Government to Malay-Muslim organisations must be for voluntary work to help the community and not for “creating a platform for people to be involved in partisan politics”.

The Prime Minister said he is confident that the Malay/Muslim community is “committed to a Singapore anchored on (being) multiracial and meritocracy.”

He added: “Whether we define an issue is a community or a national problem is less important than whether we are doing our best to tackle it.”

Mr Lee noted that Malay Singaporeans have made “significant progress over the years”. Household incomes are rising and education levels are improving within the community and Malays are excelling in many fields, he said.

He held up the example of Dr Rusfiah Abdul Jallil, a Senior Research Fellow at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore. She did her post-doctorate research in stem cells and vascular biology at Stanford Medical School, and is an active volunteer.

Mr Lee also announced that 18,000 more prayer spaces will be added by 2016, when three new mosques will open in Woodlands, Jurong West and Punggol.