

How coral island row is to be settled

SINGAPORE, Sun. The question of who is the rightful owner of the disputed Pulau Batu Putih, a coral island off Johor, will be determined through negotiations between legal officials of Malaysia and Singapore, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The understanding was reached yesterday when the Prime Minister called on his Singapore counterpart, Mr Goh Chok Tong.

Dr Mahathir said the dispute would be negotiated based on legal documents.

Speaking at a Press conference before tomorrow's fourth Asean summit, Dr Mahathir made it clear that he would want the issue to be settled based on legalities (legal documents on the matter).

In a lighter vein, Dr Ma-

hathir said the island must be settled based on legal documents and not on historical facts.

"Historically, some of us may want to claim Singapore as well because it was part of Malaysia at one time," he said.

He pointed out that the legal aspect of the matter must be given due consideration. "Otherwise, we are going to have problems with everybody," he said.

He cited the Exclusive Economic Zone as an example, saying that although the EEZ is legally Malaysia's, others might want to claim it based on historical grounds.

"How do you like it when they start claiming Ipoh, for example, as part of somebody else's territory," he said on a lighter tone.

Dr Mahathir laughed when some of the Ministers and reporters at the Press conference said that a similar claim could also be made upon Kedah, his home State.

He said the same principle should be applied in solving disputed territories.

"We cannot use historical reasons in one instance and the legal aspect in another. We must determine which of these aspects we want to use and then negotiate," he said.

On the existence of a lighthouse and a radar (managed by the Port Authority of Singapore) on the coral islands, he said they had been there for a long time not only to guide vessels, but also for the authorities on the shore to determine the destination of

vessels.

On recent reports that fishermen from Johor coastal areas have been harassed by the marine patrol boats from the republic while fishing near the island, Dr Mahathir said: "We have asked our marine police to investigate and they said there was no harassment."

The question of who owns Pulau Batu Putih, situated 15km from Teluk Ramunia in Johor and 59km from Changi, was first raised when the Singapore authorities allegedly prevented Malaysian fishermen from Pengerang, Sungai Rengit, Kampung Melayu, Teluk Ramunia and Punggol from going close to the island.

A lecturer on history from Universiti Malaya, Prof Shahrir Talib, at a forum on

Oct 26 last year in Johor Baru, had said the island was never under Singapore's jurisdiction.

He said the island belonged to Johor since the East India Company's time.

The claim was based on historical documents as well as treaties signed between the British trading companies and Sultan Hussein Shah of the then Johor-Riau empire.

When the Sultan and the Johor Temenggong signed a treaty in 1824, relinquishing Singapore to the company, Pulau Batu Putih was not included.

The accepted boundaries for the company to form the Singapore settlements in the treaty was 10 geographic miles (16.3km). Pulau Batu Putih is 59km from Singapore.