

Dr M: Leave emotions out of boundary talks

17 JUL 1992
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PULAU REDANG: Discussions between Malaysia and Singapore to establish a clear-cut sea boundary should be conducted on the basis of legality instead of emotions, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

The Prime Minister said if such talks were tainted with emotions, the problems of overlapping territorial claims could never be resolved.

He said whichever side could prove that the area in dispute belonged to it, the other side would have to accept it.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was bound to run into a lot of border problems such as territorial claims and counter-claims since it was the only country in Asean that had borders, both land and sea, with all other Asean countries.

"However, this has not and should not sour our relationships with all these countries," he said when responding to questions on Malaysia-Singapore ties in the light of recent arrests of fishermen from the republic in Malaysian waters.

"Thailand claimed that part of our sea belong to them, so we sat down and talked and decided that we should have a joint exploitation of the area," he said.

"We have overlapping claims with Vietnam too but even with Vietnam, we sat down and talked," added Dr Mahathir who was in Pulau Redang for a visit.

Dr Mahathir expressed disappointment that the fishermen case had been overplayed by the Singaporean press, thus causing unnecessary tension.

He said the negative reports did not affect Malaysia as it had been used to criticisms from within and outside the country.

"But it affects Singaporeans' thinking about Malaysia," he added.

Dr Mahathir added that Malaysia had arrested foreign fishermen before, such as those from Thailand and the Philippines but they did not react as though Malaysia had done it on purpose.

He said Malaysian fishermen too had been harassed or arrested by its neighbouring countries "but all this is normal among neighbouring countries."

Besides, he said, Malaysia had never hesitated to arrest its own fishermen for breaking the law.

Dr Mahathir also said Malaysia had confiscated so many Thai fishing boats that almost 100 of them could be seen lying idle now at the Chendering jetty near Kuala Terengganu "but our relationship with Thailand is as good as ever."