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MAHATHIR URGES DIALOGUE TO SETTLE SPRATLY CLAIMS

BEIJING, June 16 (Bernama-Kyodo) - ⁹³ Malaysian Prime Minister ^{(29) The Overseas} Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that China wants good economic relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and that territorial disputes can be solved through bilateral discussions.

"Chinese and other Southeast Asian Nations claims on the Spratly islands may be a problem, but can be discussed with bilateral talks," Dr Mahathir said at a press conference here.

Six nations have territorial claims on whole or part of the group of 33 mostly barren islands, collectively known as the Spratlys, in the South China Sea.

The islands are believed to be potentially rich in oil, natural gas and mineral reserves and have been hotly contested by Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam.

The Chinese and Vietnamese navies clashed over the islands in 1988, leading to a Chinese military buildup in the region.

The two countries remain the most adamant about their claims, with a Vice-Chairman of Vietnam's National Assembly saying in April, it is the sacred duty of Vietnamese Armed Forces and people to defend full national sovereignty over Truong Sa (the Spratlys)."

According to an English-language China daily, Chinese President Jiang Zemin, in talks with Dr Mahathir yesterday, defended China's military buildup, saying it is an important force in safeguarding peace in Asia.

Mahathir, who is on a 10-day official visit to China, had a response similar to that of Philippine President Fidel Ramos, who visited Beijing in late April and came away convinced that China would not use its economic strength for the purpose of aggression and harassment.

"We agreed if there are conflicting claims, we should sit down and discuss them, he said." "I don't expect a complete solution at the moment, but the fact that China is willing to sit and talk is good indeed." --Bernama-Kyodo