

'Claimants can resolve dispute through negotiation'

PM: Talks key to

MIRI, Fri. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that countries claiming either part or all of the Spratlys can resolve the dispute through negotiations and not confrontation.

"Not by force but through talks," the Prime Minister said when speaking to reporters here after an overnight visit to Pulau Layang-Layang, the island off Sabah which is being developed into a tourist destination.

Countries had the right to establish whether such claims were correct, he said, referring to the situation recently where China erected some structures on a few of the Spratly islands and these were destroyed by the Philippines military, leading to a short period of tension in the area.

Dr Mahathir also said that Malaysia had established its sovereignty over Pulau Layang-Layang on the basis that it lay within the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

This matter could no longer be disputed and other countries could not claim the island as theirs, he said.

The EEZ extends to 200 nautical miles from the shore in which Malaysia claims sovereign and exclusive rights over her natural resources. In 1982, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos) sanctioned coastal states' jurisdiction over EEZ's and also imposed obligations on these states for proper management and control of the resources in their zones.

Pulau Layang-Layang is the only island in the Spratlys open to the public. China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia have overlapping claims on all or some of the islands that make up the Spratlys.

In stressing that Layang-Layang was clearly Malaysia's, Dr Mahathir said: "We have determined that it (the island) is in our waters because it lies within our EEZ."

He noted that the claims of the other countries were based on their practice of fishing in the South China Sea.

Since the Spratlys were among their traditional fishing grounds, these countries claimed the islands were theirs, he added.

Some of them had even gone to the extent of laying

claim to the offshore areas of Sarawak which they claimed to be their traditional fishing grounds, Dr Mahathir said it was a fact that in the days of yore their fishermen never ventured that far.

Dr Mahathir also said that facilities at Layang-Layang, needed to be upgraded to turn it into an attractive tourist destination.

The stumbling blocks were accessibility and accommodation, he said.

Transportation that could handle more tourists and more cargo was required, as well as more lodging facilities, he added.

Ekran Air Services, a newly-formed subsidiary of Ekran Berhad, proposes to operate flights to Layang-Layang and Mulu, site of the world's largest cave system.

It plans to use the Canadian-made de Havilland Dash-8/200 aircraft for this, and Dr Mahathir, who flew to the island on board such an aircraft, said the plane could ferry 37 passengers as well as more cargo than similar airplanes which could ferry 17 or 18 passengers.

He said that by using the Dash, the runway on the island need not be lengthened beyond today's 1,080 metres because the airplane needed a shorter take-off and landing distance even with a maximum load of between 50 and 57 passengers.

The Prime Minister said that since the tourists to Layang-Layang were mostly divers and birdwatchers, the 17 rooms at the Layang-Layang Island Resort were insufficient.

For Mulu, Dr Mahathir said, the Government would extend the runway by 200 to 300 metres to accommodate the Dash-8/200 and Dash-8/300.

Overall, he said, he was satisfied with the facilities at both Layang-Layang and Mulu.

He was accompanied on the trip by Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud and State Finance and Public Amenities Minister Datuk Dr George Chan.

Meanwhile, Ekran chairman Tan Sri Ting Pek Khiing said the number of rooms at Layang-Layang would be increased by the end of June to 75 and number 120 by year's end. — Bernama

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