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Islands

LIGITAN, SIPADAN ISLANDS OVERLAPPING CLAIMS DISCUSSED QUIETLY

By: Khairdzir Yunus

JAKARTA, Jan 3 (Bernama) -- Indonesia and Malaysia are pursuing discussions through "quiet diplomacy" to resolve their overlapping claims to the Sipadan and Ligitan islands off Sabah.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas said both countries were represented in the talks by ministers but not their ministers of foreign affairs.

"However, till now there has been no progress," he told a New Year press briefing at his ministry here today.

Without naming the ministers, he said they had both been accepted by President Suharto and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as their respective personal representatives at the talks.

Alatas said the foreign ministers were not involved in the discussions in order to make it informal.

"Later, when there is agreement, (the issue) will be returned to the foreign ministers for formal discussions," he added.

He hoped that the low-key talks would be fruitful this year.

Alatas said the "quiet diplomacy" was agreed to by the two countries after previous talks at the technical and legal level did not produce the desired results.

Both sides possessed documents and legal arguments to back their claims but they were unable to establish the ownership status of the islands, he added.

As such, the issue could only be referred to a third party, the International Court of Justice, as proposed by Malaysia but Indonesia felt it would be better if the matter could be settled bilaterally at the political level first, he said.

"If there is no success, then the matter can be taken to a third party but even then Indonesia will be happier if the Asean mechanism is used," he added.

-- BERNAMA