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Malaysia-Indonesia (Roundup)

SIPADAN-LIGITAN CLAIM GOES TO WORLD COURT

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 7 (Bernama) -- The longstanding territorial claim by Malaysia and Indonesia on the Sipadan and Ligitan islands off the east coast of Sabah is nearing a solution.

In the highlight of a fruitful two-hour meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Indonesia's President Suharto here today, the two leaders agreed to refer the 27-year-old dispute over the pair of tiny islands to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague in the Netherlands.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would accept the ICJ's decision even if it was in favour of Indonesia.

"I feel that whatever decision, whether it favours Malaysia or Indonesia, is not the issue because we have agreed to accept the (ICJ) decision," he told reporters after bidding farewell to Suharto at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport in Subang. Suharto was here for a two-day working visit.

At their meeting held at the Prime Minister's Department, the two leaders covered a wide range of political and economic issues and were in agreement on several matters.

Dr Mahathir and Suharto also discussed the possibility of establishing a bridge link between Peninsular Malaysia and North Sumatra as well as expanding Malaysian investments in Indonesia.

Both leaders reiterated that Asean would continue with its constructive engagement policy on Myanmar and agreed that non-trade issues such as human rights should not be allowed to be raised at the World Trade Organisation meeting in Singapore in December.

After the meeting, Suharto had lunch with Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar at Istana Negara before leaving for the airport to fly home.

Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi described the meeting as "very substantive, one that proves the strong ties between the two countries".

He told reporters after the meeting that the two leaders felt the Sipadan-Ligitan issue should not be allowed to drag on and wanted the ownership claim to be settled amicably without creating any difficulties or tension.

Abdullah and his Indonesian counterpart, Ali Alatas, will meet soon to decide on the procedures to bring the case before the ICJ.

The two countries had made overlapping claims on Ligitan and Sipadan, a world-famous haven for divers, since 1969 and had set up a Joint Working Group in 1991 to determine their ownership.

Indonesia had initially opposed taking the matter to the ICJ, preferring it to be settled within the Asean framework.

Abdullah also said that Suharto informed Dr Mahathir that Indonesia was willing to supply more workers to Malaysia and agreed that there should not be any illegal workers here from his country as they would pose problems.

At a separate news conference, Alatas said the proposed bridge link between the two countries was a "good idea" and further discussions on the matter would take place.

"For such a project, it is primarily the private sector that ought to come up with the capital and the two governments ought to further discuss this possibility," he said.

Alatas said Indonesia was also planning to build bridges to link

Sumatra and Java, Java and Bali, and between its other islands.

During the meeting, Dr Mahathir expressed Malaysia's keenness to expand its investments in Indonesia and open up oil palm estates in the eastern part of Indonesia.

This was welcomed by Suharto who hoped that special attention would be paid to the eastern part of Indonesia, an area which the Indonesian government was trying to promote to investors.

"We would continue to need investment projects that are labour-intensive as a preference," Alatas added.

Both countries would also continue consultations regarding the laying of underwater power transmission cables to supply electricity from the Bakun hydroelectric dam in Sarawak to Peninsular Malaysia which will pass through Indonesian archipelagic seas.

The two leaders expressed concern over the heavy maritime traffic, especially large ships, in the Straits of Melaka and the need for them to discuss with Singapore ways to relieve the situation.

Dr Mahathir and Suharto were also in agreement that Asean's constructive engagement policy towards Yangon should be continued, sharing the view that isolating Myanmar would be of no use. -- BERNAMA

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