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Malaysia-Indonesia

WORLD COURT TO DECIDE ON SIPADAN/LIGITAN DISPUTE

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 7 (Bernama) -- Malaysia and Indonesia have decided to end their 27-year-old territorial dispute over the Sipadan and Ligitan islands off Sabah's east coast when they agreed to submit their claims to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague for arbitration.

Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the agreement was reached at a meeting today between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Indonesia's President Suharto, who is on a two-day working visit here, at the Prime Minister's Department.

Briefing reporters after attending the two-hour meeting, Abdullah said the two leaders have voiced their aspiration that the issue could be settled amicably without creating any difficulties or tension.

"They decided that the matter be referred to a third party and the best avenue was through the ICJ," he said, adding that the matter will be submitted to the ICJ simultaneously by Malaysia and Indonesia.

Abdullah said the foreign ministers of the two countries would hold a meeting soon to decide on the procedures to bring the case to the World Court.

Malaysia and Indonesia have made overlapping claims to the tiny islands since 1969 and had set up a Joint Working Group in 1991 to determine their ownership.

The two Asean member countries have also exchanged memoranda to explain each other's stand in the claims.

Kuala Lumpur had suggested that the claims be submitted to the ICJ but Indonesia initially opposed it, arguing that any arbitration should take place through the institutions provided within the Asean framework.

However, Indonesia changed its stand when its Foreign Minister Ali Alatas told reporters during his visit here this year that Jakarta was willing to refer the matter to the World Court if bilateral talks failed.

Abdullah said Dr Mahathir and Suharto felt that the issue should not be allowed to drag on and that the matter should be resolved now after more than two years of negotiations.

Asked by an Indonesian reporter why Malaysia did not agree to resolve the issue within the Asean framework as suggested by Jakarta, Abdullah said Dr Mahathir felt that the issue of territorial claims also involved other Asean members such as the Philippines, Thailand and Brunei.

"So in this situation, it is better that the issue be referred to a third party and the best neutral side is the ICJ," he said.

The foreign minister said the two leaders also discussed a wide range of other issues, including the Indonesian workers in Malaysia and the two countries' stand on Myanmar and the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

On the Indonesian workers, Abdullah said Suharto informed the Prime Minister 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.

Dr Mahathir, on his part, agreed to share Malaysia's experience on land development with Jakarta, he said.

On Myanmar, Abdullah said Dr Mahathir and Suharto agreed that Asean's constructive engagement policy towards Yangon should be continued "because they felt that isolating Myanmar would be of no use".

The two leaders also agreed that non-trade issues such as human rights and workers' plight should not be allowed to be raised at the WTO meeting

in Singapore in December.

They also discussed the possible involvement of Indonesian businessmen in the Bakun hydroelectric dam project.

Abdullah described the meeting as "very substantive, one that proves the strong ties between the two countries". -- BERNAMA

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