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Agreement to refer dispute to International Court signed

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Malaysia and Indonesia today signed an agreement to refer their overlapping claims to Pulau Ligitan and Pulau Sipadan to the International Court of Justice.

The agreement was signed between Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his Indonesian counterpart Ali Alatas.

At a Press conference later, Abdullah described the agreement as the best platform "to find a peaceful and lasting solution" to the issue.

"Leaders of both countries have expressed the wish that this issue should be resolved peacefully through negotiations so as not to affect the existing excellent bilateral relations between Malaysia and Indonesia," he said.

The signing ceremony was held in conjunction with the special Asean Foreign Ministers meeting at the Regent Hotel.

The issue of Pulau Sipadan and Pulau Ligitan surfaced in 1969 during a discussion at the technical level towards delimitation of the overlapping area of continental shelves that border both Malaysia and Indonesia.

Abdullah and Alatas had signed a memorandum of understanding to refer the dispute to the International Court of Justice last May.

Malaysia and Indonesia have held a number of bilateral talks since 1991 over the islands which are 32km south of Semporna and 40km east of Tawau.

Covering only 16 hectares, Sipadan ranks among the world's top 10 most beautiful islands and it is Malaysia's most favoured scuba-diving destination.

Abdullah also hoped that the decision to resolve the issue on the basis of international law would set a precedent for other countries in the region to follow.

"Our action today is a reaffirmation of our faith in the international judicial process and our respect for the rule of law.

"Further, our decision to submit this issue to the ICJ for a final settlement also means that we will not be burdening the future generations of both countries with an unresolved dispute."

The decision was reached during a meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and President Suharto in Jakarta last October after a deadlock in the matter.

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

In echoing the same sentiment, Alatas said both countries had realised that territorial disputes of any kind could create tensions that might jeopardise the bilateral relations between the disputants.

"An amicable solution can be reached through a political settlement or through the involvement of a neutral third party in an adjudication process.

"The decision also reflects the maturity of the relations between our two Governments as well as the determination of our two countries to keep strengthening our close and excellent relations," he said.

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