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M'SIA PREPARING TO HOLD MORE TALKS ON SIPADAN-LIGITAN

JAKARTA, Jan 22 (Anex-Antara) -- Indonesia and Malaysia are preparing to hold another round of talks to settle their dispute over the Ligitan and Sipadan islands after completing the first round early this month, a Foreign Ministry official here said.

Izhar Ibrahim, the Ministry's Director General for Political Affairs, told reporters yesterday the preparations were being made although it was still not certain when the second round of talks would take place.

The two countries at a meeting between President Soeharto and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed in Kuala Lumpur last October agreed to submit their dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague and their subsequent talks concerned the processes and procedures they would follow in seeking the arbitration, Ibrahim said.

In their talks early January, the two sides agreed to meet again in Jakarta but "so far there is no certainty yet as to when the second round will be held because consultations on it are still going on at departmental level," he said.

Sipadan and Ligitan are small islands located in the Makassar Strait on the sea border between the Indonesian province of East Kalimantan and the East Malaysian state of Sabah.

The dispute surfaced in 1969 when the two sides were engaged in efforts to delineate their continental shelves. Since then the two sides twice attempted to settle their overlapping claims to the islands in bilateral talks.

In the first attempt, the Indonesian delegation was led by then Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja and the latest effort was made in 1993, Ibrahim said.

He further said that in the upcoming talks in Jakarta, the Indonesian delegation would be led by Minister/State Secretary Moerdiono, while the Malaysian delegation would be headed by Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Early last week, Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the first round of talks on settling the dispute through the ICJ were focused on preparations the two countries had to make before the case was actually submitted to the ICJ.

Kuala Lumpur, according to various press reports, had also agreed to abide by whatever the ICJ's verdict would be, including a decision favouring Indonesia. -- Anex-Antara