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PM: Problems over Woodlands, Tanjung Pagar

Azmi M. Anshar; Sharif Haron

KOTA TINGGI, Thurs. - For the first time, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has disclosed the problems the Government faced in some of its dealings with Singapore, particularly in giving up the Malaysian Naval Base in Woodlands and being pressured to do the same for its railway land in Tanjung Pagar.

The Prime Minister revealed how Singapore raised the rent for the naval base in the republic's attempt to take the land away from Malaysia.

He also spoke of how Malaysia eventually surrendered the base willingly to the republic to maintain friendly ties although Malaysia had the right to own the base.

"But they raised the rent and they posed problems for us. We still handed over the base. They wanted the base so we gave it up."

As for the Tanjung Pagar railway station land, Dr Mahathir said the Government also faced problems trying to retain ownership of the area.

He said although Malaysia retained ownership of the railway land for 999 years, Singapore was pressuring the Government to give it up by various means, which he did not elaborate.

"There are many problems with the railway land," he told reporters tonight after touring the Sebania Resort, about 80 kilometres from here.

"Only the Government knows this problem and we don't tell it to the people because we want to maintain good ties with Singapore. But since you asked, I have to relate it."

Elaborating further on the problems with Singapore, Dr Mahathir said there were always matters which hindered the Government from forging good relations with the republic.

"Sometimes they utter something, sometimes they do other things... all sorts of things... no need for me to say it.

"We find it difficult to be friends although we want to be friends. We try hard to be friends but sometimes with Singapore, it is very difficult to be friends."

On Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's disparaging comments on Johor which were made in a sworn affidavit and what Lee's motives were, Dr Mahathir said it was Lee's effort to prove that Johor "was not the place for someone to save themselves".

"But Singapore is no safer than Johor," he said. "I am convinced that Lee did not believe that his affidavit would be exposed to the people of Malaysia. Nevertheless, he should not have stated those words although he did it privately.

"To put it in an affidavit, it becomes official."

Brushing aside the suggestion that Lee's statement was a "cheap shot", Dr Mahathir reiterated that Lee did not realise that his affidavit would be exposed.

"He didn't know," he said. "He thought that he was writing something private."

Dr Mahathir debunked the theory that Lee calculatively made the statement to discourage Singaporeans and foreigners from shopping in Johor in order to save Singapore's languishing retail trade.

"I don't think so," he said in dismissing the theory. "His effort to win compensation from his defamation suit in the millions of dollars was his intention."

Dr Mahathir said there was very little the Government could do to

improve ties with the republic but what Singapore could do was not to make remarks against Malaysia.

"Don't say that we do not practise meritocracy when we know that there is no meritocracy in Singapore," he said. "Only certain people are discriminated against.

"When the same people can achieve a lot of things in Malaysia, why is it that they cannot do the same in Singapore. But that is what is happening."

Dr Mahathir advised Singaporeans to look at themselves and not accuse Malaysia as a place for car-jackers and utter other hurtful words.

"It is not nice," he said. "You want to be friends, you say nice things."

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