

31 MAY 1997

Sipadan-claims

SIGNED:M'SIA-INDON SPECIAL ACCORD ON DISPUTED ISLANDS

KUALA LUMPUR, May 31 (Bernama) -- Malaysia and Indonesia today signed a special agreement here to refer their dispute over the islands of Sipadan and Ligitan off Sabah to the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

This marked the start of the end to nearly three decades of overlapping claims on the islands.

Malaysia's Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his Indonesian counterpart Ali Alatas signed on behalf of their countries.

Both described the agreement as a historic move to prevent the issue from burdening the future generations of the two countries.

Abdullah and Alatas said their countries will accept the ICJ verdict as "final and binding".

The brief signing ceremony was held on the fringe of a one-day special meeting of Asean Foreign Ministers.

The two countries had agreed on a memorandum relating to the procedures to submit their claims to the ICJ at The Hague to lay to rest the sovereignty dispute that broke out in 1969.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Indonesia's President Suharto had agreed during the latter's visit here last year to refer the matter to the ICJ.

The two leaders wanted the issue be resolved peacefully through negotiations so as not to impede the existing excellent bilateral relations.

Abdullah said after signing the agreement that the readiness of the two countries to accept the ICJ judgement would be the impetus to the further enhancement of mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation.

"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," he said.

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

Abdullah said Malaysia and Indonesia had intensified efforts bilaterally to find a peaceful and lasting solution to the dispute over the two islands since 1991.

The spirit of friendship and neighbourliness that had characterised discussions on the islands had paved the way for Malaysia and Indonesia to conclude the special agreement, he said.

Alatas, in concurring with Abdullah's views, said the decision reflected the maturity of relations and determination between the two countries "to keep strengthening their already close and excellent relations."

"Indeed the agreement that we sign today is a historic one for it is the first time that our two countries ever agreed on modalities for a court settlement of a dispute between them," he said.

Alatas also said both countries were fortunate that their two leaders had deliberated on the issue and concluded that it was for the mutual interest that the case of the two islands be settled peacefully through the ICJ at the earliest possible time.

"I'm sure you agree with me that this decision reached by our two

leaders is a wise decision," he said. -- BERNAMA
ES RN