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Abdullah on ties with Singapore

Sharif Haron; Alex Choong

JOHOR BARU, Sun. - Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said today he believed ties between Malaysia and Singapore, which had been affected by a number of contentious issues, could return to normal.

This, he said, followed the understanding reached between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong when the two leaders met on Thursday.

"I am very happy that a meeting was held between the two Prime Ministers," he said.

He was speaking to reporters after launching Tunas Budiman, a bulletin of Johor Baru Umno division at Kompleks Mawar here.

Abdullah said during the meeting between Dr Mahathir and Goh, there was understanding on how existing bilateral problems could be handled and solved.

"This will also involve a number of meetings at the officials' level to iron out the problems.

"I believe following the meeting (between the two Prime Ministers), we can consider that ties between Malaysia and Singapore which were at a low level, can return to normal."

In Kuala Lumpur, MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu said that it was important that Malaysia and Singapore maintained "a high decorum of friendship" as this will bring benefit to both countries.

The meeting between Dr Mahathir and Goh last Thursday, he added, was welcomed.

"The cordial meeting will pave the way for better bilateral relations," he told reporters after meeting MIC divisional leaders.

Samy Vellu said more of such meetings should be held between Malaysia and the republic to improve relations.

MIC hoped Dr Mahathir would make a reciprocal visit to Singapore to hold talks with Goh.

It was reported that both Malaysia and Singapore had decided to set aside differences and work towards improving bilateral relations.

Both Prime Ministers had agreed they would not criticise each other's country openly.

Samy Vellu said efforts to maintain bilateral relations between the two countries should not be hindered by any individual.

"The relationship between the two countries is more important than anything else as we stand to benefit from each other," he added.

Abdullah was also asked to comment on reports from Manila that Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado had pushed for a strong American military presence in the Philippines amid a row with China over the disputed Spratly islands in the South China Sea.

Besides the Philippines and China, the Spratlys chain, which straddles vital sea lanes, is believed to sit atop vast oil deposits, is also being claimed in whole or in part by Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan and Vietnam.

In his response, Abdullah said it was no secret that the Philippines had good relations with the United States.

But, he said, in matters pertaining to the security and stability of the region, it was important for Asean countries to work together and co-operate.

On the Spratlys issue, he said Asean had agreed to discussions.

Abdullah said if Asean countries could mutually understand and respect

each other, and did not interfere in one another's internal affairs, then the grouping's solidarity and strength would ensure regional stability.
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