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LEAD Malaysia - Singapore

M'SIA-S'PORE STANDOFF OVER TANJONG PAGAR RAIL CHECKPOINT

KUALA LUMPUR, July 31 (Bernama) -- Malaysia and Singapore are bracing for a standoff with both countries refusing to budge on the eve of a deadline set by Singapore for the relocation of the Malaysian immigration checkpoint at the Tanjong Pagar railway station south of the island republic.

Malaysia maintained that it will stay in Tanjong Pagar and it was up to Singapore to defuse the dispute arising from Singapore's decision to move its customs, immigration and quarantine (CIQ) facilities north from Tanjong Pagar to Woodlands closer to the Malaysian border.

A Foreign Ministry statement today said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi expressed his conviction to his Singapore counterpart, S.Jayakumar, two days ago that Singapore and Jayakumar, in particular "were well placed to defuse the situation because Singapore could decide not to carry out certain contemplated action".

The six-page statement detailing how talks between the two countries to resolve it had broken down was issued at a media briefing by Foreign Ministry Secretary-General Datuk Abdul Kadir Mohamad.

The statement warned that taking into account the larger context of relations between Malaysia and Singapore, the Foreign Ministry "views gravely" that there should be no undue delays, much less a disruption, of Malaysian train services into Singapore from Aug 1.

"I am confident that there will be no problems (for railway travellers) as it is well within Singapore's means and competence not to create problems," said Abdul Kadir.

"It is up to Singapore to decide whether the trains will flow as usual. Of course, they have the rights to do all the checks," said Kadir.

The Foreign Ministry statement said the issue came about after Singapore informed Malaysia in a letter dated last April 24 that Malaysia should relocate its CIQ "within its own territory", presumably Johor Baharu, effective Aug 1, 1998.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said last Monday, when asked by Malaysian reporters covering his trip to Africa, that Malaysia would not shift its CIQ out of Tanjong Pagar.

Dr Mahathir is due to return early tomorrow morning.

In the meantime, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik said KTM Berhad had made contingency plans in view of the standoff but declined to reveal details.

There are 27 daily train services, including 15 for passengers, between the two countries.

In SINGAPORE, Jayakumar said Malaysia's insistence to continue conducting its immigration clearance at the Tanjong Pagar railway station had serious consequences.

He told the Singapore Parliament today that the Malaysian Immigration would be doing so without legal authority.

Reiterating Singapore's position on the dispute over railway travel procedures, Jayakumar said if Malaysian Immigration officers endorsed passports of rail passengers travelling from Singapore to Malaysia, it would be unauthorised and contrary to the proper sequence of immigration clearance.

"Under Singapore law, this would create irregularities in the passport," he said.

Abdullah and Jayakumar met three times in Manila this week in efforts to resolve the impasse.

The Malaysian statement said that following disagreements between Malaysia and Singapore over the interpretation of the Points of Agreement (POA), signed by then Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in 1990 pertaining to development of KTM land in the republic, Malaysia decided to retain its CIQ in Tanjong Pagar instead of moving to Woodlands.

Singapore Deputy Home Affairs Secretary Tan Boon Huat subsequently informed Malaysia on July 2, 1997 that the Malaysian CIQ could not remain in Tanjong Pagar after Aug 1 1998.

"In this letter, Singapore still did not reveal its real intention to have the Malaysian CIQ at Tanjong Pagar move out of Singapore," the statement said.

After a nine-month gap, the Singapore Deputy Home Affairs Secretary wrote that Malaysia should relocate its CIQ "within Malaysia's own territory with effect from 1 Aug 1998" and that Singapore would repeal the States of Malaya Customs Duties Collection Act.

The Act gives legal authority for Malaysian Customs to collect duties in Singapore.

Abdul Kadir informed the Singapore High Commissioner to Malaysia that if the repeal was carried out without consultation with Malaysia, it would constitute a unilateral act on the part of Singapore.

"He also said that in such a situation, Wisma Putra was uncertain how the government of Malaysia would react," the statement said.

In a series of four meetings this month between foreign officials of both sides, Singapore said Malaysian Customs could remain in Tanjong Pagar but still insisted that its immigration should move out of Singapore.

Malaysia instead requested for space within the Woodlands Train Checkpoint (WTCP) as an interim measure but was informed by Singapore that it could agree to provide space for tables on the passenger platform at the WTCP.

"The Malaysian side maintained, since ample space was available and in order to enable the Malaysian Immigration to function with dignity, that these officials be given space and be allowed to perform their functions inside the WTCP, not outside on the passenger platform," the statement added.

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