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Bilateral ties back on keel

FOR the people of Malaysia and Singapore, undoubtedly the meeting of their leaders yesterday marks an encouraging turn in the relations between the two neighbours. The meeting reflects a genuine will on the part of the two countries to put their ties, strained in recent months over several issues, back on keel.

Although a surprising turn of events to outsiders, insiders who could read the local and regional situations better, in fact expected the two Asean countries to get back together soon. The recent positive statements emanating from the two countries reinforced their optimism.

That the four-eyed talks in Sepang between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong were a success is obvious. Both leaders made it clear at their joint media conference after almost two hours of discussion, that the two countries want to let bygones be bygones and focus on improving relations and tackling urgent issues before them. In response to questions as to whether the two countries are putting behind their strained relations, Dr Mahathir responded in no uncertain terms: "We hope so, unless somebody else says something. Not me, anyway."

Goh, on his part, acknowledged that differences between the two countries, are inevitable. But the important thing is to narrow the gap between the differences and work towards maximising the common areas. And, "where we disagree on certain things, we agree to come back tomorrow".

These uplifting pronouncements from the leaders, who last met in April and their fifth so far this year, will indeed provide a solid start for the building of better ties between the nations. It is a good sign that the two leaders, resuming talks on outstanding issues taken up at their last meeting in Johor, "are improving" their discussions. A contentious issue is the supply of water to Singapore. Malaysia said it will determine how much water it is going to provide to Singapore and see how it can meet the republic's requirements. Following the February talks between the two prime ministers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia agreed to continue supplying water to Singapore beyond 2061, an undertaking that was supposed to be confirmed in an agreement within 60 days. The period has since lapsed but the agreement has not been signed.

It is heartening that officials of the two countries will meet to resolve the dispute over the Customs, Immigration and Quarantine facilities at Tanjong Pagar. A significant point which emerged from the talks is the willingness of Singapore to assist Malaysia in overcoming its financial problems. This augurs well for bilateral ties and Asean solidarity. With Singapore's help and given Malaysia's strong economic fundamentals, stability and creditworthiness, it should have no problem raising funds in the republic.

The cordial Malaysia-Singapore talks set the stage for further discussions to foster better relations. This indisputably is an important precursor to the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum summit to be held in Kuala Lumpur later this month where Asean cohesiveness is expected to be tested. The present hiccups in relations between some countries are no more than storms in a tea-cup. Asean unity is paramount. As Dr Mahathir said recently, the grouping is still very much intact. Detractors will no doubt try their best to break up Asean but the spirit of Asean unity will always prevail.

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