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Decision to bar RSAF jets permanent, says Dr M

Kamarul Yunus; Hamisah Hamid

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the decision to bar the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) from using Malaysian airspace without clearance is permanent.

"There is no point for the Government to impose it temporarily," Dr Mahathir told reporters after visiting the National Stadium at Bukit Jalil in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Hours earlier, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar announced that the Government was terminating the practice of giving blanket approval to the RSAF to fly into Malaysian airspace.

From today, the RSAF will have to apply for individual clearance from the Malaysian Government for its fighter jets to use Malaysian airspace.

This follows the move by the Malaysian Government to terminate the present practice of giving blanket approval for the

The new ruling involves RSAF fighter jets, including those on training purposes, and other types of aircraft for search and rescue operations.

It also sees the termination of both countries' combined search and rescue operations and exercises.

Applications for clearance from RSAF will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

Dr Mahathir dismissed suggestions that the decision was made in view of the present strained relationship between Malaysia and Singapore.

"No ... the decision was made. We are just claiming back our areas bit by bit," he added.

He said Malaysia will continue to forge cooperation with Singapore but we cannot allow them (Singapore) to enter our airspace frequently.

"We have allowed them to do so as part of the cooperation under the Five-Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) but we now find that it is unsuitable," he added.

The Prime Minister also said the decision was made in view of national security and complaints lodged by the public living near the border areas.

"Yes, people had expressed their dissatisfaction of alien aircraft flying into our airspace.

"... sometimes, they fly into our space without prior notice and when accidents occurred, they come in and take out their people without our approval," he added.

Dr Mahathir said the Government will protest if Singapore choose to ignore the decision.

Syed Hamid, who spoke to reporters in Kuala Lumpur after opening a seminar on loans for the small- and medium-sized industries, said the lifting of the blanket approval cover five areas:

- * The withdrawal of waiver of the requirement to apply for diplomatic clearance for the RSAF fixed wing aircraft based at Payar Lebar when transiting south Johor to and from Singapore's training area in the South China Sea;

- * The withdrawal of the clearance granted to all types of RSAF aircraft to conduct training within the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) Low Flying Area;

- * The termination of the arrangement for the RSAF to conduct navigational training over the airspace of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak;

- * The termination of the combined search and rescue operations and

exercises, which were formalised through the RMAF and RSAF Combined Search and Rescue procedures; and

* All RSAF aircraft to cease entry into Malaysian airspace after taking off from Tengah airbase.

The Singapore Government was officially informed of the Malaysian Government's decision yesterday. A letter with regard to the matter was sent to the Singapore High Commission in Kuala Lumpur at 8.30am.

Responding to a question, Syed Hamid the decision is not a drastic one.

"It is a well-thought out decision ... it is for the public interest and to protect our low-flying areas.

"I do not envisage any strong reaction to it ... our relations with Singapore will be as usual," he said when asked whether the Government's move is a reaction to the current relations between the two countries.

He also said Malaysia still belongs to FPDA but it has to postpone some activities due to the current economic situation.

Apart from Malaysia and Singapore, the other FPDA members are Britain, New Zealand and Australia.

The Special Malaysia Disaster Assistance and Rescue Team (Smart) and Singapore's Disaster Assistance and Rescue Team (Dart) have also undertaken joint search and rescue exercises.

Bernama reports: Singapore yesterday said Malaysia made the decision concerning the use of the airspace by the RSAF without prior consultation or advanced notification to the republic even though one of the agreements provides for six months' notification.

A Singapore Ministry of Defence statement issued in Singapore said the RSAF has alternative arrangements to ensure that its operational effectiveness is not compromised and that its training will not be affected.

It said it was informed yesterday by the Malaysian Defence Ministry that Malaysia would terminate various formal agreements and arrangements governing the use of Malaysian airspace by the RSAF with effect from today.

It said in some cases, the arrangements date back to the early 1960s.

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