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Discussions within 60 days over disputed island

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Malaysia and Singapore have agreed to resume negotiations within 60 days to finalise the Special Agreement and refer the overlapping claims on Pulau Batu Puteh to the International Court of Justice.

A joint communique issued at the end of the two-day working visit by Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said the negotiations was to finalise the agreement before referring it to the ICJ in the Hague.

The decision to refer the dispute to the ICJ was made by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Goh during their talks in Langkawi in September last year.

The 15-judge ICJ is the judicial arm of the UN.

It was established in 1946 to bring about settlement through peaceful means and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law.

The question of sovereignty over Pulau Batu Putih, known in Singapore as Pedro Branca, an island situated 15km from the coast of Johor, was raised in 1989 when Singapore stopped Malaysian fishermen from approaching the island.

The decision of the Port of Singapore Authority to build a helipad on the island on which the British built the Horsburg lighthouse in 1928, aggravated the problem.

Only nations may apply to and appear before the ICJ and a dispute can only be heard if the countries concerned have accepted its jurisdiction. Until 1995, 47 nations have accepted the jurisdiction of the court.

The ICJ can also assume jurisdiction in two other circumstances where two states agree to submit a dispute to the court or where both parties have signed a treaty with a provision to refer disputes to the court.

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