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KL, S'pore plan new mechanism to ensure strong ties

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MALAYSIA and Singapore have agreed to work out a new mechanism to tackle any problems that may affect bilateral relations.

This was agreed upon during a meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Singaporean counterpart Goh Chok Tong in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Briefing the press later, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi relations are "back to normal... just like before they were strained," apparently referring to the episode early last year over the derogatory remarks made by Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew in a court affidavit. Lee subsequently apologised.

Goh, who arrived in Kuala Lumpur yesterday for a two-day working visit, has met with Dr Mahathir six times since the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Edinburgh, Scotland, last October.

Including yesterday's meeting, the two leaders have met thrice this year; the first in Johor Baru on January 20, and then in Singapore on February 7.

This is an indication that ties between Malaysia and Singapore are as strong as ever, which the two countries feel should be maintained, including through some form of mechanism to deal with any "irritants" that might strain relations, Abdullah said.

Asked for details of the mechanism, Abdullah said basically, both countries want such problems to be resolved through consultations at the ministry-level and not wait until they require the attention of the two prime ministers.

"We must constantly consult each other," he said, admitting that there has hardly been any contact between the two ministries following the incident last year.

"A number of planned meetings were not held... for example, over issues like Pulau Batu Putih and the KTM land in Singapore," Abdullah said.

The two issues were among those brought up at yesterday's three-hour discussion between Dr Mahathir and Goh, which was followed by a delegations meeting attended by Abdullah.

The Foreign Minister said other matters raised include Malaysia's water supply agreement with Singapore as well as possible cooperation in tourism promotion and other activities in keeping with the prosper-thy-neighbour concept.

Several policy decisions were reached yesterday, details of which - both governments agreed - will be announced in a joint communique to be issued today, Abdullah said.

On the regional front, he said the two leaders viewed with concern the political and economic situation in Indonesia.

"They also agreed on the need to work together to help revive the region's economy," he added.

Bernama reports: Goh later visited Cyberjaya, Malaysia's high-tech multimedia city on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.

He was briefed on the progress of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project by the vice-president of the Multimedia Development Corp's (MDC) technology centre, Encik Salleh Masduki.

Also present were Deputy Primary Industries Minister Datuk Hishamuddin Hussein, who is the minister-in-attendance, and MDC executive chairman Tan Sri Othman Yeop Abdullah.

Goh also toured the Kuala Lumpur City Centre where the world's tallest building, Petronas twin towers, is located.

During the tour, Goh said that Malaysia and Singapore are now on the "right track" to achieving better ties.

"I think we are now on the right track to achieving better ties. Certainly ties today are much better than last year," he told reporters.

Goh said there will always be problems between the two countries and there are still some unresolved issues.

"You can't expect issues that have been there for years to be solved at one meeting. The important thing is we are making progress and we will look at the issues," said Goh.

Goh said Dr Mahathir and he had directed their officials to intensify efforts to solve differences between the two countries.

Goh also said Dr Mahathir had told him that he would agree to continue to supply water to Singapore beyond 2061, when the current agreement expires, on terms and conditions to be agreed upon by both sides.

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