

17 SEP 1998

Mahathir-Singapore

DECISION TO BAR RSAF JETS IS PERMANENT, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 17 -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today Malaysia's decision to bar Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) planes from entering the country's air space from tomorrow is permanent.

"Looks like it's going to be permanent, not temporary," he told a news conference after visiting the National Stadium at Bukit Jalil here.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on Defence Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar's announcement earlier today that all special arrangements and waivers now granted to RSAF planes to use Malaysian air space would be withdrawn.

Syed Hamid had said the decision was taken in view of the increasing congestion over the country's air space and concerns expressed by the general public.

Asked if the decision would be reviewed later, the prime minister said it was no point for the government to take a temporary decision.

Dr Mahathir said what Malaysia did was to "take back our territory bit by bit".

"We have the special waiver previously as part of the cooperation under the Five-Power Defence Agreement but we find that it is no longer suitable now," he said.

Asked if the decision was taken as a reaction to critical remarks about Malaysia by Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew in his just-published memoirs, Dr Mahathir said it had nothing to do with it.

"We decided on this much earlier," he added.

Asked if the decision would spell an end to military cooperation between Malaysia and Singapore, Dr Mahathir said there was still room for cooperation between the two countries.

"There can be cooperation but we cannot allow them (RSAF jets) to fly as they want in our air space because sometimes they do so without giving us notice," he said.

Dr Mahathir said sometimes when accidents happened involving Singapore aircraft in Malaysian territory, RSAF planes would enter Malaysian territory for search and rescue without asking for authorisation.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysians living in Southern parts of Johor bordering Singapore were unhappy about the presence of Singapore air force planes in their midst.

"They are unhappy over foreign planes flying over our air space," he added.

Asked what would happen if Singapore breached the new rules, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would protest.

When asked if Lee's book would be allowed to be sold in Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia is a free country

"You want to say anything you can, but they must remember that what they are doing is to incense the people, to make the people very angry," said the prime minister.

Dr Mahathir said such actions would "simply make it difficult for us to have good relations with Singapore."

"Even if the leaders want to have good relations, the people may not want and leaders must of course respect the wishes of the people," Dr Mahathir said.

Asked if Malaysians should ignore Lee's book, Dr Mahathir said: "We can

ignore but people feel... you know you go and run down their respected leaders like Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak, naturally people are not happy."

Lee who is now a Senior Minister had among other things accused Malaysia of bullying and intimidation during the two years Singapore was part of the Malaysian federation which ended in 1965.

The memoirs also infuriated Malaysian leaders because Lee had depicted some Malaysian leaders as corrupt and had a part in inciting racial riots in Singapore in 1964.

--BERNAMA

ES