

07/11/1998

### Living as good neighbours

WE hope Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong was reasonably impressed with the KL International Airport. Malaysians in general were more than impressed with the Singapore premier on Thursday, when he flew in without much fanfare to meet with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the RM9 billion airport, gave a press conference jointly with the Malaysian Prime Minister, and then left. There wasn't much time to really appreciate the new airport but when he boarded his flight home, Goh went without the excess baggage in the form of the strained ties the republic had been having with Malaysia over the last few months.

Many will be wondering where that unneeded baggage has been dropped off, but most Malaysians and Singaporeans will simply be glad that common sense has once again prevailed. Sure, it will take a little longer for bilateral relations to come back to where they were before the latest row, which is usually the case each time a couple have just ended yet another heated argument. What's important now, though, is the strong political will to displace the disputes with a fresh vow to strengthen cooperation that was displayed by Goh and Dr Mahathir after their meeting.

Harsh words and terrible blows that have been traded - not just between government leaders but also between some of the media in the two countries - had placed ties almost beyond reconciliation. These will not be forgotten even after they have long been forgiven, but the parties involved must live with that and hopefully not take one another for granted again. Singapore needs Malaysia, and Malaysia needs Singapore probably more than it ever did before. These are tough times for both. Malaysia is expecting its economy to contract by 4.8 per cent this year and Singapore has just revised its projected gross domestic product (GDP) for 1998 to shrink to minus 1.5 per cent. Both expect to recover by the end of next year, but the pre-crisis growth rates will not return for several more years. At a time when synergies should be established for one to complement the other, Singapore and Malaysia have been out to outdo each other. Sure, they need to compete with each other but they will be better off doing that in a healthy environment. At times like these, salvation could just be across either side of the Causeway.

Thursday's meeting, which caught many by surprise, saw Dr Mahathir and the younger leader agreeing to put an end to disputes. Politicians from both countries will now not go to the media to cry foul or cry wolf; any dispute shall now, hopefully, be dealt with by the relevant officials. This is consistent with the Asean tradition and augurs well for the grouping. It should also provide a cue for other leaders in the region to moderate their own ways in dealing with issues involving their neighbours. Dr Mahathir has assured Singapore on the airspace and water issues and Goh, on his part, has promised to order his officials to look at the best means to help Malaysia raise funds in or through Singapore.

Any assistance rendered by Singapore to help the Malaysian Government or private sector raise funds will be very meaningful at this stage. The republic has been accused of not being a friend in times of need and this is an opportunity to silence the critics. It must be remembered, too, that Singapore is a major foreign investor in Malaysia; therefore, Malaysia's economic revival is important to its own well-being. Some Malaysian companies also have operations in the republic and thousands of Malaysian workers cross the Causeway daily to earn a living. Singaporeans are also

the largest contributor to Malaysia's tourism.

There is too much to lose by being apart. By joining forces, the neighbours can show the region the way out of the crisis and expedite their own recovery. Neither needs the distractions that have plagued them in the last many months. Undoubtedly, the meeting at KLIA will pave the way for a rethink of other matters which have put a strain on bilateral ties. And coming just before the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation's leaders meeting middle this month and the Association of South-East Asian Nations' summit next month, Dr Mahathir and Goh have made a timely gesture of solidarity that should make these hard times easier to live with.

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