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Malaysia and Singapore agree to set aside differences

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SEPANG, Thurs. - Malaysia and Singapore have agreed to set aside their differences and work towards improving bilateral relations between the two countries.

For a start, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said both Prime Ministers had decided that they would not criticise each other's country openly.

"We hope so, unless somebody else says something. Not me, anyway. The two of us will not say anything," Dr Mahathir said when asked if the two countries would step up measures to improve bilateral ties.

He was speaking at a joint Press conference with his Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong at the Pan Pacific Hotel adjacent to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Goh arrived here for a half-day visit to hold bilateral talks with Dr Mahathir.

The two met for 1 1/2 hours at the airport's Bilik Bunga Raya.

Goh said although differences between the two countries might arise from time to time, it was important to narrow the gap and work towards maximising the common areas.

"And where we could agree, we will agree and where we disagree on certain things, we agree to come back tomorrow," he said.

Dr Mahathir and Goh last met at the joint opening of the second Malaysia-Singapore link in April.

Ties between Malaysia and Singapore have been strained in recent months over several issues, including Singapore's refusal to allow people from Peninsular Malaysia who had stopped working in Singapore to withdraw their savings in the Central Provident Fund.

The diplomatic tug-of-war heightened in recent months when Singapore insisted that Malaysia move its Customs, Immigration and Quarantine facilities from Tanjong Pagar to Woodlands - a move which Malaysia felt was Singapore's silent strategy to get Malaysian authorities out of the republic.

Politicians from both sides again took part in heated arguments, mostly in the Press, when Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs, which were published recently, vilified some of Malaysia's former leaders who are now dead.

Goh had said last Sunday that Singapore wanted good relations with Malaysia and that it was not in the interest of either country to have poor relations.

Asked what they discussed today, Dr Mahathir said they talked about bilateral issues and how the two countries could improve their relations.

"We talked specifically on how Singapore can be of help to Malaysia during this economic crisis," said Dr Mahathir.

He said Singapore had agreed to facilitate Malaysia's request to raise funds in the republic.

He did not give details but said officials of the two countries would discuss the matter.

Goh said Singapore agreed to assist Malaysia in overcoming its financial problems but first it had to ascertain what were Kuala Lumpur's requirements.

Dr Mahathir said that Malaysia would need to raise funds in Singapore.

He said Singapore had promised to negotiate on how best the republic

could be of help in that area.

On the supply of water to Singapore, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would determine how much was required by Singapore and how its requirement could be met.

In February, Malaysia had agreed to continue supplying water to Singapore beyond 2061, an undertaking that was supposed to be confirmed in an agreement within 60 days.

The agreement has not been signed although the 60-day period has lapsed.

Dr Mahathir also said Singapore aircraft wanting to enter Malaysian air space for search and rescue operations would be granted immediate permission.

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