

05 NOV 1998

LEAD Mahathir-Singapore

MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE AGREE TO IMPROVE TIES

SEPANG, Nov 5 (Bernama) -- Malaysia and Singapore agreed to work towards improving bilateral ties and set aside whatever differences between the two neighbouring countries.

"We hope so, unless somebody else say something. Not me, anyway," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told a joint news conference with his Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong at the Pan Pacific Hotel next to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) here.

Goh arrived here today for a one-day visit. The two leaders earlier held bilateral talks at the airport's Bilik Bunga Raya, the fifth meeting between them so far this year.

Dr Mahathir was asked if the two countries would set aside their differences and work towards improving bilateral ties.

Goh told the news conference that differences between the two countries might arise.

However, he said the important thing was to narrow the gap between the differences 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.

The last time Dr Mahathir and Goh met was at the joint opening of the second Malaysia-Singapore crossing, in April this year.

Ties between Malaysia and Singapore have been strained in recent months over several issues including the location of Malaysia's rail, immigration and customs facilities at the Tanjong Pagar railway station, the request for more water supply from Malaysia and the status of pension savings of Peninsular Malaysians working in Singapore.

Goh was quoted as saying in Singapore 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 on 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 the two leaders also discussed on how Malaysia could accede to Singapore's requirement for water.

Meanwhile, Goh said when they last met in Johor Baharu in April, they discussed several matters of mutual concern.

"We are improving our discussions," Goh said referring to his talks with Dr Mahathir.

On the supply of water to Singapore, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would determine how much water it was going to provide to Singapore and how much the republic would need.

Singapore wanted to extend its existing water pact beyond 2061 but wanted more.

Following the February talks between the two prime ministers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia agreed to continue supplying water to Singapore beyond 2061, an undertaking that was supposed to be confirmed in an agreement within 60 days.

This 60-day period has since lapsed but the agreement has not been signed.

On the relocation of the Customs Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) facilities owned by Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTMB) at Tanjong Pagar

south of the island to Woodlands in the north, Dr Mahathir said he and Goh discussed the matter today although no agreement was reached.

Singapore moved its CIQ facilities from Tanjong Pagar to Woodlands last Aug 1.

Malaysia was recently given an extension of another one-and-half months to present its legal argument to maintain its CIQ facilities at Tanjong Pagar after asking Singapore for more time following the expiry of the deadline on Oct 31.

Asked if there would be a follow-up to their meeting today, Dr Mahathir said the officials of both countries would meet.

On the use of Malaysian airspace by the Singapore airforce jets, Dr Mahathir said they agreed that Malaysian authorities would give immediate permission for search and rescue operations.

Dr Mahathir said Singapore would however need to request permission first.

Goh said there were certain procedures that would have to be adhered to by Singapore.

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

He said Dr Mahathir had informed him of Malaysia's requirements.

"The details will be worked out by the officials of the two countries," he said.

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.

"Singapore can be of help to Malaysia during this crisis," said Dr Mahathir.

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