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Singapore-editorial

NO QUICK SETTLEMENT OF S'PORE-M'SIA BILATERAL PROBLEMS

SINGAPORE, Dec 23 (Bernama) -- Questioning Malaysian leadership's approach to negotiating deals and political interest on water supply to Singapore, the Strait Times said it hoped that discussions to resolve several bilateral problems "will not drive the two countries even further apart".

Kicking off its editorial today with the aborted funds-for-water deal between Singapore and Malaysia, the pro-government newspaper said no one should be surprised as "flip-flops" have come to characterise Malaysia's behaviour on a number of bilateral issues.

"As the two countries embark on discussions to settle a whole host of bilateral problems, Singaporeans and Malaysians must hope they can work out something of mutual benefit.

"But let there be no illusion that a settlement can come about quickly. The negotiations will be arduous. Let's hope they will not drive the two countries even further apart," the editorial said.

Singapore, it said, must hold fast to its position and on the issue of water supply, time and advancing technology were on the republic's side.

"Malaysia, for all some of its politicians might like to have think, does not have Singapore over a barrel - of water or whatever else," said the editorial.

Malaysia which supplies the bulk of the island republic's water needs decided last week not to take up a US\$4-billion loan offer in exchange for a new water agreement initiated by Singapore.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said there was no real need for the loan now. Notwithstanding that, he again assured that Malaysia would continue to supply water to Singapore after the expiry of the existing pact in 2061.

While lauding that Malaysia was able to find its own financial feet, the editorial questioned the Malaysian leadership's approach to negotiating deals.

"The recent cancellation is a reminder, once again, of how unpredictable this can be. No one should have been surprised that Malaysia cancelled the deal; flip-flops have come to characterise the behaviour on a number of bilateral issues," it said.

It cited the disputes over the Malaysian customs and immigration checkpoint at the Tanjong Pagar train station in the republic and the Points of Agreement, a pact to develop Malayan Railway land here.

The editorial also cast a stone at the "extent to which the Malaysian political ground shares the interest if the leadership in pursuing friendly, win-win deals with Singapore.

"It is probable that some sectors in Malaysia oppose the proposed deal, not wanting to give up so easily what they see as their most important hold over Singapore. Such an attitude, if extended to all forms of cooperation, can only spell trouble."

Dr Mahathir and his Singapore counterpart, Goh Chok Tong, met on the sidelines of the Asean Summit in Hanoi last week and they emerged to announce that the several outstanding bilateral issues would be resolved as a package.

Apart from the customs and immigration issue, the package would also include Singapore's request for water and the use of Malaysian airspace for the republic's air force; Malaysia's request for the withdrawal of the

Central Provident Fund by peninsular Malaysians; and the move by the Malaysian government not to allow trading of shares in Singapore's Central Limit Order Book (CLOB).

-- BERNAMA

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