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Singapore must bear responsibility (HL)

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SINGAPORE, Sat. - As the Singapore deadline for Malaysia to move its Customs, immigration and quarantine facilities out of Tanjong Pagar came and went, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the republic would be held responsible for any deterioration in relations between the two countries.

Despite a strong warning from Singapore authorities yesterday, Malaysia remained firm on its decision not to remove its CIQ facilities from the 66-year-old station.

Trains ran as scheduled, experiencing only minor delays when they stopped for the first time at the newly-opened Woodlands train checkpoint (WTCP) for Singapore Customs, immigration and quarantine clearance.

At the Tanjong Pagar checkpoint, details of passengers' passports were keyed into the computer but the documents were not stamped.

This is an interim arrangement by the Malaysian Immigration to allow passengers boarding at Tanjong Pagar to avoid any possibility of them facing problems at the WTCP.

Asked to comment on the issue upon his return from Africa this morning, Dr Mahathir said: "It is not our wish to have any dispute with them. We were going along fine ... then suddenly they decided they do not want our people to be in Singapore.

"The initiative is with them," he told a Press conference at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport on arrival from a week-long visit to South Africa, Mozambique and Namibia.

The Prime Minister was asked to comment on the stand-off following Singapore's decision to move its CIQ facilities from the Tanjong Pagar railway station to the new checkpoint at Woodlands, closer to its border with Malaysia.

On Malaysia's action to resolve the dispute, Dr Mahathir said: "I have just been briefed. I'll need a little time to think about what we are going to do."

Wisma Putra yesterday announced that Malaysia would not relocate its CIQ checkpoint in Tanjong Pagar to Woodlands despite today's deadline issued by the Singapore Government.

The republic said the Malaysian Immigration would cease to have any authority to perform its functions at Tanjong Pagar once Singapore Immigration was no longer present to lend its authority.

Dr Mahathir was also asked whether Singapore's action was an underhand tactic to force Malaysia CIQ facilities out of the republic.

"I don't know whether they can force us or not but certainly when we are having problems with the economy, this is an unwelcome problem.

"I do not know why they choose this time to do this, maybe to them it is a strategy," he said.

On whether he was confident the dispute could be overcome without the intervention of a third party, he said: "We hope we can. We will try."

When pointed out that rail travellers would face difficulties if both Governments refused to budge from their stand, Dr Mahathir said:

"As far as we are concerned, we will function as usual. As to travellers facing difficulties, we will see."

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