

01 AUG 1998

LEAD Malaysia-Singapore

SMOOTH TRAIN SERVICE WITH MALAYSIAN IMMIGRATION AT TANJONG PAGAR

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 1 (Bernama) -- Train services between Malaysia and Singapore proceeded smoothly today without any untoward incidents with the Malaysian immigration continuing to operate from the Tanjung Pagar railway station south of Singapore.

Malaysian immigration in Tanjung Pagar recorded passenger details into a computer but did not stamp their passports. The passengers later disembarked at the Woodlands Train Checkpoint (WTCP) for clearance by Singapore authorities before continuing their journey to Malaysia.

Singapore, which shifted their immigration authorities to the WTCP today, had warned of "serious consequences" if Malaysian immigration officials continue to clear immigration at Tanjung Pagar as they would be doing so without legal authority.

A Singapore Immigration and Registration statement this evening said the WTCP started operations this morning and all systems functioned well.

It also said that passengers on arriving and departing trains were cleared by Singapore's Custom and Immigration smoothly and efficiently without any delay.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who returned from a trip to Africa shortly after the first train from Malaysia arrived in Woodlands, said Malaysia did not wish to have any dispute with Singapore and called on the island republic to settle the issue over the long-standing Malaysian immigration checkpoint at the Tanjung Pagar railway station.

"The initiative is with them," the Prime Minister told reporters at the KL International Airport after touching down at 6.45am.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia did not want to have a dispute with Singapore.

"We were going along fine when suddenly, they decided that they do not want our people to be in Singapore. I need a little bit of time to think about what we need to do," said the Prime Minister who was briefed on the latest situation at the airport.

To a question, Dr Mahathir said he did not know if Singapore could force Malaysia to relocate its checkpoint to Woodlands "but certainly when we are having problems with our economy, this is an unwelcome problem.

"I don't know why they choose this time to do this thing. Maybe to them it is a strategy," said Dr Mahathir.

Asked if he was confident that Malaysia and Singapore would be able to settle the dispute without the intervention of a third party, Dr Mahathir said: "We hope we can, we'll try."

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said he was happy that the service was proceeding well and urged for goodwill to prevail notwithstanding the problems in bilateral ties.

"I have been told that efforts had been made not to create problems regarding to endorsement of the passports and this would certainly have contributed to some ways to smooth running of the trains," he said.

"I like to think that there's obviously a way out of this problem at the technical level, at the level of those who are operating on the ground. That explains why the train services have proceeded well."

"That being the case let the train service carry on well in the interests of both countries. If it can go on well today there's no reason it cannot go on well tomorrow. If it doesn't go on well, then there is ill will," he said.

The first train into Singapore from Malaysia arrived and stopped at the Woodlands checkpoint at 6.20am before proceeding to Tanjong Pagar.

Rail passengers who enter Singapore from Johor Baharu are not affected as they would be following the correct order of immigration clearance.

Express Rakyat, the first train out of Tanjong Pagar for Malaysia also left on schedule at 8.15am. The train had its usual 20-minute wait at the Bukit Timah station for an incoming train from Johor Baharu to pass before stopping at the WTCP for Singapore Immigration clearance and this was completed without any hassle within half an hour.

Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik said that Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTM Bhd) may have to adjust its outbound train schedule from Singapore due to the clearance time by Singapore authorities at the WTCP.

According to a KTM Bhd report, it took between 15 and 35 minutes for passengers to undergo Singapore immigration and customs checks depending on the number of coaches.

"If this goes on for the next few days, then we may have to reschedule our trains to take into account this extra time," he said.

Prior to this, the trains do not have to stop in Woodlands because passengers are cleared by both Malaysia and Singapore authorities at Tanjong Pagar.

He said all KTM Bhd top management staff had been stationed at the WTCP to monitor the situation and extra personnel were based at the checkpoint to assist passengers with their luggage when they got down to pass through Singapore immigration and customs.

"Some people are old and weak so we are mobilising our staff there and to make sure we have enough trolleys to help them push their bags to the customs and undergo this check," he said.

Up to 27 trains run daily between the two countries for passenger, freight and a golf shuttle service. The passenger service also includes the famed Eastern and Oriental Express.

-- BERNAMA

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