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Territorial tug-of-war dates back to 1969

THE territorial tug-of-war between Malaysia and Indonesia over the Sipadan and Ligitan islands dates back to 1969 when the international boundary was drawn up.

Both countries, which hold annual border talks, had then agreed to maintain the status quo.

The issue, however, resurfaced in the early nineties provoking several emotionally charged exchanges between the two countries.

In 1991, a picture in a Jakarta newspaper of Malaysian soldiers with M-16 rifles guarding the islands prompted Indonesian Armed Forces Chief General Try Sutrisno to say:

"Imagine what may happen if we are provoked (by this photograph) and retaliate with cannons."

The reason the issue was brought to the fore again after being relatively submerged in previous decades was simple - the natural beauty of Sipadan had started attracting tourists and Malaysia allowed Borneo Divers, a private company, to develop the island as a tourist resort.

Malaysian navy patrolled the surrounding waters to protect tourists and local fishermen. This incensed Indonesia which leapt to action and stated that neither country should develop the islands until the dispute is settled.

This led to several high-level talks which culminated in the decision to bring the dispute to the International Court of Justice.

The chronology of events from 1991:

* Oct 1991 - The inaugural Malaysia-Indonesia Joint Commission Ministerial Meeting on the dispute was held in Kuala Lumpur. Both countries agreed to continue friendly talks.

* July 6, 1992 - The Malaysia-Indonesia working group, formed to discuss the dispute following the Joint Commission Ministerial Meeting, held a meeting in Jakarta. This ended in a stalemate.

* Feb 8, 1993 - The Foreign Ministers of Malaysia and Indonesia met at a meeting of the Malaysia-Indonesia Joint Commission to discuss the dispute and exchanged documents on their positions. Both countries agreed to resume talks the next year.

* Jan 1994 - Malaysia and Indonesia ended talks without resolving the dispute.

* Sept 1994 - Malaysia proposed that the dispute be brought to the Court. However, Indonesia rejected it and urged Malaysia to refer the case to the Asean High Council. Malaysia did not accept this as it felt Asean countries had vested interests.

* March, 1995 - Indonesian Army Chief of Staff General R. Hartono hinted that the issue was "nearing a solution" but did not want to disclose what it involved.

* June 19, 1996 - Indonesian Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Alatas expressed his country's willingness to take its claim to the Court "if bilateral talks and top level political discussions" with Malaysia fail to resolve the matter.

* Oct 7, 1996 - The two countries, after a meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Indonesian President Suharto, decided to refer the territorial dispute to the Court.

* May 31, 1997 - Malaysia and Indonesia signed a Special Agreement to bring the dispute to the Court. The agreement was signed by Foreign

Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his Indonesian counterpart Ali Alatas.

* Sept 30, 1998 - The two countries signed a Joint Notification Letter to be submitted for registration at the Court.

* Nov 2, 1998 - Both countries jointly registered with the Court of the dispute concerning the sovereignty of the two islands.

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