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Malaysia-Singapore

M'SIA-S'PORE TIES BACK TO NORMAL, SAYS ABDULLAH

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 16 (Bernama) -- Relations between Malaysia and Singapore are "back to normal" now, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said today.

"It's back to normal just like before we had the problem," he told reporters after a meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Singaporean counterpart, Goh Chok Tong, at the Prime Minister's Office here.

Ties were strained between the two countries last year after remarks by Singaporean Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew on crime in Johor Baharu. Lee subsequently apologised.

He said Dr Mahathir and Goh, among others, discussed the two countries' overlapping claim on Pulau Batu Putih, an island off Johor which Singapore calls Pedra Branca, the new water agreement, the development of land in Singapore belonging to the Malaysian railway company, Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad, and tourism.

Singapore sources most of its water supplies from neighbouring Johor under long-term agreements.

Abdullah described the meeting as "very positive" and was conducted in the spirit of goodwill.

He said the leaders agreed that details of their discussions would be written into a communique to be issued tomorrow before Goh's departure for Melaka on his way back to Singapore by road.

Both sides agreed on the need for Malaysia and Singapore to work together to intensify relations to ensure they would benefit from the cooperation in line with the "prosper thy neighbour" spirit.

"There is a certain air of bullishness," he said of the leaders' meeting which touched on key bilateral and regional issues of mutual concern. A delegation meeting between both sides took place after the prime ministers' meeting which lasted more than an hour.

Apart from bilateral matters, they also addressed the regional currency crisis and expressed concern over the situation in Indonesia where riotings were reported in many parts of the country in protests against rising food prices.

Abdullah said their concern would be reflected in the communique which is being drafted by officials for the leaders' approval.

He said they agreed that both countries should work together to restore investor confidence in their economies which particularly saw sharp falls in Malaysian stock prices and currency.

They also talked about measures taken to ensure that bilateral relations would not be strained by "irritants and pinpricks".

In this regard, the leaders emphasised the importance of regular consultations between relevant ministries to iron out problems quickly and not wait until the two premiers meet to resolve them.

Abdullah said such mechanisms were already in place but efforts must be made to ensure that such consultations became "a working habit".

The media conference was also attended by a horde of Singapore journalists accompanying Goh on his first official visit to Malaysia since 1994.

This was the third meeting in a month between the two prime ministers, the most frequent they ever had within such a short period and which also reflected the urgency both gave to tackling the region's economic woes.

Asked if there would be a further need for discussions on the water pact, Abdullah said the important thing was that certain policy decisions had been decided at the prime ministers' level.

"These policy decisions will give us some kind of new directions that will help us in discussions about this issue," he said.

Abdullah said Singapore had expressed the hope for a certain guarantee of a continuity in water supply from Malaysia.

Besides Abdullah himself, Malaysia was represented at the delegation meeting by International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Deputy Primary Industries Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein and Foreign Minister Secretary General Datuk Abdul Kadir Mohamad.

The Singapore side included Foreign Minister Prof S. Jayakumar and Trade and Industry Ministry Permanent Secretary Khaw Boon Wan.

Before the start of the delegation talks, Goh presented Dr Mahathir with a picture of the prime minister taken at a reception of the Alumni Medical Centre in Singapore on Jan ,1 1982.

Dr Mahathir, who graduated in medicine from Singapore in the 1950's, makes annual visits to Singapore to attend the medical alumni gathering. --
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