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Singapore-Malaysia

SINGAPORE WANTS TANJONG PAGAR SOVEREIGNTY DECLARED FIRST

SINGAPORE, Jan 20 (Bernama) -- Malaysia must recognise Singapore's sovereignty over the Tanjong Pagar immigration dispute first before the two countries can proceed to resolve all outstanding bilateral issues as a package, Foreign Minister S.Jayakumar said today.

He told Parliament that Singapore had given Malaysia a month to produce its legal arguments to operate its customs, immigration and quarantine (CIQ) facilities at the Tanjong Pagar rail station, here.

"We have informed Malaysia that if they do not produce their legal arguments in one month's time, we will assume that they no longer wish to pursue their legal claim to be at Tanjong Pagar," he said.

Bernama understands from foreign ministry officials here that the deadline begins a month from the end of Ramadan.

Jayakumar said Singapore could not proceed to the negotiating table to resolve the package of outstanding issues agreed upon by the prime ministers of the two countries last month without the acknowledgement of Singapore's sovereignty over the CIQ matter.

He said Singapore's position was that Malaysia's CIQ facilities in Tanjong Pagar were not based on legal or extra-territorial rights but were at the "leave and consent of the Singapore government".

The CIQ controversy broke out last August when Singapore shifted its CIQ facilities from the Tanjong Pagar station to the northern Woodlands checkpoint on Aug 1 while Malaysia's immigration continued to operate from there.

The rail service has been managed by Malaysia's KTM Berhad since it began in the 1920s under British colonial rule.

Jayakumar said Malaysia did not meet a Dec 15 deadline to submit its legal arguments and on Dec 26, Malaysia's then Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi replied that the latest agreement between the prime ministers of the two countries on Dec 17 to discuss all outstanding bilateral issues as a package including the CIQ matter, superseded any previous understanding.

Abdullah, who is now Deputy Prime Minister, also said that Malaysian officials would be ready to begin negotiations sometime after Hari Raya Aidilfitri that was celebrated yesterday.

Jayakumar said he replied to Malaysia on Dec 30, pointing out that Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong had told his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, that Malaysia would have to recognise Singapore's sovereignty and not claim that it had a legal right to operate its CIQ in Singapore.

"PM Goh added that although there was no legislation allowing Malaysian Immigration to operate in Singapore, he was prepared to discuss the possible location of Malaysia's CIQ facilities in Singapore as part of a package of bilateral issues to be resolved," he said.

Jayakumar said the issue was a question of Singapore's sovereignty, just as Malaysia had exercised its right to close its airspace to Singapore air force planes last September.

To a question on Singapore's next move if Malaysia failed to do so, Jayakumar said he did not want to pre-judge the situation and would wait for Malaysia's response first.

Asked if the package of negotiations included a proposal to build a new bridge to replace the existing causeway linking Singapore and Malaysia,

Jayakumar said the matter was not part of the package.

He said Singapore had yet to be officially informed by the Malaysian government of any plans despite press reports that a consortium would be undertaking the project.

"Any proposal to build a bridge must be agreed to by the two governments," he said.

-- BERNAMA

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