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Dr M: Both sides must compromise

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JOHOR BARU, Mon. - Long-standing bilateral issues between Malaysia and Singapore can only be solved if both countries compromise, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said Malaysia was always prepared to compromise, but this must not be a one-sided affair.

"Both sides must see how much they can give in. Ask Malaysia to compromise but others (Singapore) don't compromise, susahlah sikit (it's a bit difficult)," he said.

He was responding to a question on outstanding bilateral issues during a Press conference held after he opened the Port of Tanjung Pelepas' conference and exhibition here today.

The two-day event, PTP 2000 Conference and Exhibition, was held in conjunction with the opening of the Port of Tanjung Pelepas near Gelang Patah.

Dr Mahathir said the main obstacle hindering a solution was coming to terms with the matters involved. The issues in question include the sale of water to Singapore, Singapore Central Provident Fund (CPF) withdrawals by people from Peninsular Malaysia working in the republic, intrusions by Singapore Air Force aircraft into Malaysian airspace, and land owned by the Malayan Railway in the republic.

To another question, Dr Mahathir said the deadlock in negotiations on the CPF issue had nothing to do with the May Umno elections.

"If the election was the cause, the CPF issue would have been long settled. We are not delaying the matter deliberately."

Singapore Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar was quoted in The Straits Times last week as saying the Malaysian Government had given no response on specific dates for the next round of talks on the CPF issue due to the Umno elections.

Dr Mahathir today described the CPF issue as a simple problem.

"All we ask of them is, when our people have stopped working there, they can take back their CPF money. This is also our practice. When Singaporeans who work in Malaysia return to their country, they can take their money.

"The same with Malaysians from Sabah and Sarawak who worked in Singapore. They can take back their money after they have stopped working there. What we don't understand is, why can't Malaysians from the peninsula do the same?" he asked.

On the Malayan Railway land in Singapore, Dr Mahathir said the solution to the problem depended on the other issues as well.

"It is not just a simple isolated problem. It has connections with other bilateral issues. It should be solved as a package," he said.

He hoped it would be resolved in a year, as stipulated under the points of agreement between Malaysia and Singapore.

"I don't know whether in one year it will be resolved or not, but I hope it will. We will see when we come to that (if the issue cannot be solved in a year)," he said.