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Kuan Yew confident bilateral issues can be resolved

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew today expressed confidence that the Prime Ministers of Malaysia and Singapore would be able to meet soon to resolve outstanding bilateral issues.

He said if there was enough "give" between the two countries, "then in two or three months, the two Prime Ministers can meet, resolve the key issues and move on".

"I believe there is enough 'give' on both sides on the key points. I leave (Malaysia) more optimistic than when I came," Lee said at a Press conference at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel on the last day of his four-day working visit.

This is his first working visit to Malaysia since handing over the Singapore premiership to Goh Chok Tong in 1990 and assuming the role of Senior Minister.

Bilateral ties between the two countries were strained in recent years due to problems such as the location of the Malaysian Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) complex in Singapore and negotiation for a new agreement on water supply to the republic.

Lee said the two countries could not move on key issues unless they "give".

"There has been a stalemate for many years and it is not to our advantage. Both sides will gain in many respects if we moved on."

Saying that the issues were beyond the level of civil servants, Lee said Singapore had to decide whether to amend the points of agreement to accommodate the wishes of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"I would recommend yes if there was 'give' on other issues, a fair deal on water supply and fair terms concerning the CIQ and Central Provident Fund.

"It has to be a package, one which is balanced."

Asked whether the mistrust between the two countries was justified, Lee said Singapore did not harbour any mistrust. "The mistrust is on your side. When we reach an agreement and spell it out in words, let's stick to it."

Lee proposed for Ministers from both countries to meet regularly on personal terms so that they could cultivate friendships.

"There should be some system of regular exchanges without an agenda. I have already told (Foreign Minister) Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar that Malaysian Ministers should go down to Singapore without anyone taking any notice.

"They should not be under any pressure to deliver."

It was important to form friendships, Lee said, so that when there were problems, "you will already know each other's temperament".

Lee said he was able to "call and play golf with Tunku (Abdul Rahman) and Tun (Abdul Razak)" in the roughest of times because they were friends.

"Dr Mahathir was trained as a doctor in Singapore. We share a bond."

Asked by a foreign reporter whether he was an "enemy" or "friend" to Malaysia in the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim issue, Lee said: "Singapore is not an enemy. If anything, it is a friend."

"I feel more sorry for Dr Mahathir than Anwar. I said that before the trial and I also say it now."

The Senior Minister said he felt sorry that Dr Mahathir had to pay a "heavy price" for sacking the former Deputy Prime Minister, attributed

largely to what Lee described as a series of blunders by officials who handled the sacking.

Lee said the circumstances that led to the sacking of Anwar was an "unmitigated disaster".

"There have been errors of judgment, several errors of judgment which I felt were most unfortunate."

Lee said he asked Dr Mahathir at a conference in Davos, Switzerland, a month after Anwar's arrest: "Why did you arrest Anwar under the Internal Security Act. How could he be a national security threat when until four weeks ago he was your deputy?"

The Prime Minister told him that he was flabbergasted and did not know that Anwar was going to be arrested under the ISA.

"He told me it was the prerogative of the police chief. I felt it was the beginning of a series of blunders that cost him dearly."

The Singapore elder statesman told Dr Mahathir that it should have been a straightforward criminal charge for "corruption, sodomy or whatever".

"Anwar should be produced in court the next day after the arrest, you can contest bail on the ground that he was interfering with witnesses.

"The police chief arrested him under the ISA and the next disaster was the blue eye."

Lee also expressed his bewilderment over the need to re-enact the Grik arms heist to placate cynics. He described the cynicism and scepticism demonstrated by those who have called the heist a sandiwara as "ridiculous" and "perplexing".

"Surely no Government in the world would stage a seizure of firearms and then recover them at the cost of two human beings who were mutilated cruelly."

Lee said, however, that the cynicism he spoke of was gleaned after meeting with senior journalists of local newspapers.

"If the editors accurately reflect the sentiments on the ground, then there is a lot of cynicism and scepticism."

In his one-hour long Press conference, which was packed with local and foreign reporters, Lee also spoke frankly and candidly on a number of other issues.

Among them were his impression of Malaysia after 10 years, his personal relationship with Dr Mahathir, the need for Asean to assist Indonesia, meritocracy in Singapore and how it has worked for the Malays, and the need for Umno to get the younger generation to come up with an agenda on what they want for the nation's future.

A reporter also presented Lee a hypothetical situation: What would Singapore's relationship be with a Pas-led Government?

Lee said: "Pas would need to win over the non-Muslims to come into power. On their own, they cannot do this."

The 76-year-old Lee arrived in Malaysia on Monday, taking the North-South Expressway in a motorcade from the Johor Baru Causeway accompanied by his wife Kwa Geok Choo and 10 officers.

Meanwhile, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, who met with Lee earlier today, said Lee expressed his concern over "political developments" in the country.

"He is, however, confident that we will be able to ensure continued stability."

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