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Lee: Both sides need to give

Sreerema Banoo

SENIOR Minister Lee Kuan Yew expressed optimism yesterday that the outstanding bilateral issues between Malaysia and Singapore will be resolved in two or three months provided there is enough "give" on both sides.

He told a packed news conference in Kuala Lumpur at the end of his four-day working visit to Malaysia that both countries need to compromise if the outstanding issues are to be resolved.

"I believe that if there is enough give on both sides on the key points, it is possible within two to three months to tie up the details," said Lee who is here on his first working visit to Malaysia in 10 years.

Lee, who discussed the outstanding bilateral issues with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during a two-hour meeting, said he leaves Malaysia "more optimistic" than when he arrived.

Pulled together in one package, the issues are the sale of water to Singapore, disagreement over the Points of Agreement (POA), Customs, Immigration and Quarantine status at Tanjong Pagar, flight paths of Singapore Air Force planes and Singapore Central Provident Fund withdrawals by Peninsular Malaysians working in Singapore.

These issues have been described as "thorns" pricking at the sides of the ties between the two countries and at times disagreements over the resolution of these issues have strained and made ties uncomfortable.

While both sides have tried to reach an agreement on these issues, they have reached a stalemate and Lee pointed out that the issues cannot be resolved unless both sides compromise.

Furthermore, he added, it is to the disadvantage of both countries that these issues are not resolved.

"We can't move unless both sides give on the key issues," he said, adding that the resolution of these issues have gone beyond the level of civil servants and political decisions need to be made.

Putting forward the question "Do we amend the POA to accommodate the wishes of Dr Mahathir?", he said he would "recommend to the Prime Minister (Goh Chok Tong) yes, provided there is give on the other side".

"...(such as) a fair deal on other issues like our water supply and on fair terms," he said.

He expressed optimism that if both countries can "work out the nuts and bolts, and assuming there is a measure of some give, then in two or three months the two prime ministers can meet and put the problems behind us and move on".

"Both sides will gain if we move on and restore international confidence in the ability of the two countries to cooperate at a time of great travail in the region," said Lee.

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