

18 NOV 2000

Singapore-Malaysia

UP-AND-COMING LEADERS MUST HAVE PERSONAL CONTACTS, SAYS JAYAKUMAR

SINGAPORE, Nov 18 (Bernama) -- Singapore Foreign Minister S.Jayakumar said up-and-coming leaders of Singapore and Malaysia must continue to have "personal contact" to maintain good working relations.

"Modern diplomacy still calls for personal contact. Yes, you have Internet and modern technology but the human factor is very important.

"The biggest challenge for both sides is to ensure that the up-and-coming decision-makers, the new generation, the Lim Swee Says, Hishammuddins and so on, they also establish good working relations. It helps," he told a group of visiting Malaysian journalists recently.

He said the two countries had managed to maintain an even keel despite hiccups because leaders from both sides have kept in touch, citing the relationship between Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysian leader, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin.

Key to managing the ties was not to allow occasional issues to affect overall relations, said Jayakumar, adding that he too had good working ties with several Malaysian leaders including Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who was formerly Foreign Minister.

On the package of outstanding bilateral issues, Jayakumar said the backdrop for discussions had been good following a meeting between Lee and Dr Mahathir when the former visited Malaysia in August.

But he would not predict when the problems would be resolved.

"I think if we can work it out, then we resolve some of these issues. But if we can't work them out, our relationship must still proceed," he said.

Asked if the younger generation Singaporeans had a certain degree of contempt for Malaysia due to negative reporting of the country, Jayakumar said Singaporeans, including grassroots leaders, also have recounted the same of the Malaysian media.

He said he agreed with his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, that the media had a role to play whenever there was an issue.

"I don't want to fingerpoint because I don't believe in this. There's always two sides to a story and whatever example can be given of Singapore, the Singapore side will give another example," he said.

Jayakumar said he would like to see more exchanges across the Causeway between the younger generation and not just confined to officials and government ministers.

"I'd like to see more exchanges between university students, journalists, make it more comfortable. It all adds up to whether...comes back to the perception that Singaporeans are influenced by the press. They'll hopefully beat that," he said.

On perceptions that Singapore was too close to the West, Jayakumar disagreed, saying the island-state, like Malaysia, had its policy and to advance its national interests.

He said Singapore welcomed the United States as the balancing presence in the region and the US was an important economic and strategic player.

But that did mean that Singapore accepted US policies entirely, he said.

"There are ample incidents where Singapore has had differences of views with the United States, particularly on law and order situation. Where we disagree, we stand our ground," he said and referred to the caning of American teenager Michael Fay for vandalism despite objections from the US.

-- BERNAMA

TCL RM