

Water deal can

Nst 13 SEP 2001

THE visit of Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew to Kuala Lumpur recently was a welcome breakthrough in the negotiations over water and four other long-standing issues that disturbed the relationship between the two close neighbours.

Lee claimed that Singapore had conceded more ground as it wanted to resolve the issues quickly, fearing that Singapore might have to deal with a different Government, if it waited too long!

The five issues were the sale of water to Singapore, the development of the land owned by Malayan Railways in Singapore, the status of the Customs, Immigration and Quarantine facilities at Tanjong Pagar, the use of Malaysian airspace by the Singapore Air Force, and withdrawals from the Central

Provident Fund by workers in Peninsular Malaysia.

Now it is clear as to why this agreement in principle has taken so long. According to the new understanding, Singapore will get only 350 million gallons of water which is much less than what it originally wanted. More importantly, Singapore has offered to pay 45 sen per 1,000 gallons, which is 15 times higher than the mere three sen which they now pay up to the year 2061!

That means Singapore has been getting our raw water for a song for so long. No wonder that there has been so much delay in settling the water issue!

After 2061, the raw water will be sold at 60 sen for 1,000 gallons and the rate will be reviewed every five years. That means that Malaysia

could raise the charges to higher levels later on, depending on our own needs for the precious water.

But until 2061, Malaysia will apparently sell to Singapore 100 million gallons of raw water per day and 250 million gallons of filtered water per day, which would be processed on a joint-venture basis.

It will be interesting for Malaysian tax payers to know what terms will apply to the apportionment of costs and profits to both countries for processing this water. Why can't we process the water ourselves and get a better deal?

It is understandable that Singapore would want to get an agreement on water supplies urgently to relieve itself of the phobia of surviving without adequate drinking water.

However, it is difficult to appre-

boost bilateral ties

ciate why Malaysia is committing itself to a new water agreement now about 60 years before the current agreement expires. I wonder if there is any international precedent of this kind.

Lee reportedly said at the Press conference, after the understanding was reached, that he did not think the Malaysian Government would refuse to supply water to Singapore as it would lead to the intervention of the United Nations over action by us to protect our interest and self-defence!

The use of this kind of language is unfortunate. It raises the question as to whether Malaysia has been too generous too soon, to meet Singapore's long-term needs for vital water supplies.

The other four outstanding issues are relatively small and could

have been settled earlier, but for the previous proposal by Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong for all the five issues to be settled on the basis of a package deal.

Now the officials of both sides will have to work out the details of this understanding before the final agreement can be signed. Since there is no time limit for the finalisation of the agreement, the officials could examine all the implications very carefully to avoid serious misunderstandings in the future.

Both Malaysians and Singaporeans will undoubtedly also want to know more of the details of this historic international agreement. In the meantime our bilateral relations need to be smooth to ensure suitable conditions for satisfactory

negotiations, for the finalisation of the water agreement.

Indeed as a gesture of goodwill and to hasten progress, some of the issues could be implemented earlier.

It is hoped that with the water issue out of the way, both countries will be able to develop a stronger smart partnership of prospering thy neighbour and that the frequent spats of the past, will be fewer and far between.

The additional agreement between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Lee to build a new bridge to replace the old Causeway in 2007 is a big bonus, especially to the daily commuters across the Straits of Johor.

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