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Hope for end to thorny issues

SINGAPORE Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's four-day visit to Malaysia heralds another step forward in bilateral ties and, hopefully, will lead to a solution of the contentious issues between the two countries. He is scheduled to meet Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad later today.

This meeting of the minds between the two statesmen and contemporaries, both of whom have contributed so much to the development and direction of their countries, also provides a good opportunity for an exchange of views on world events, especially the slowing economy, and what steps we can take to weather it.

The contentious issues, of which there are five, relate to the sale of water to Singapore, disagreement over the Points of Agreement for the development of railway land owned by Keretapi Tanah Melayu Bhd, the status of the Customs, Immigration and Quarantine facilities at Tanjong Pagar, the use of Malaysian air space by the Singapore Air Force and Singapore Central Provident Fund withdrawals by peninsular Malaysians who had worked in the republic.

For one reason or another, they have been left unresolved for far too long although there was a discussion of these in general terms during Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's visit to Singapore in February this year. Now is a good time to put them squarely back on the table. The meeting between Lee and Dr Mahathir may just be the key to break the impasse which has benefited no one. With resolve and goodwill, the solution could be just a handshake away. The nitty-gritty can be worked out later.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar struck an upbeat note when he expressed the hope that Lee's visit would help patch up whatever differences there are between the two countries and bring us closer towards a permanent solution to the issues.

Invariably, in matters such as these which affect national interests, emotions and sentiments will be aroused. Less harping on the differences and more on what unites us will reduce the tendency of these feelings being compounded. Instead, emphasis should be given to the positive side of the relationship in trade and investments, especially at a time when the economic downturn in the United States is having an impact on Asian economies with which the US is their major trading partner.

Outstanding problems, left unresolved, will affect future generations. An accommodating stance which incorporates the interests of both sides will result in a win-win situation. And Singapore can afford to be accommodating, considering that Malaysia's stability has, to some extent, created the environment for it to grow and prosper.

Indeed, putting the issues behind us will also pave the way for a smart partnership in subsequent endeavours. More so when communication lines have been established between senior officials of both countries to enable them to understand perspectives and sensitivities first hand.

Considering our shared history, the many commonalities that bind us in the social, cultural and religious context and our reliance on each other albeit the competition in trade and investment, the issues should not be allowed to be a thorn in our relations. The priority is on long-term bilateral ties, for the reality is that when the baton passes on, good relations must continue to flourish, especially among the young generation

of leaders.

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