

04/09/2001

Laying the groundwork for solution to issues

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew are expected to lay the groundwork in solving the contentious issues between the two countries during their meeting tomorrow.

Once the broad principle is agreed upon by both leaders, follow-up discussions would be taken up by officials later, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said today.

He said Malaysia and Singapore strove for a satisfactory conclusion and it was hoped Lee's four-day visit would provide the push in finding the solution.

No agenda had been fixed for tomorrow's meeting, but Syed Hamid said both leaders were free to bring up any matter they deemed important, including the contentious issues.

However, the minister said Malaysia realised the problems could not be resolved just over one visit.

"But at least it gives the leaders a chance to review all outstanding matters. I think that is good," he said after hosting a luncheon for Lee and his entourage at Shangri-La Hotel.

On how optimistic he was that both leaders would come to an agreement, Syed Hamid replied: "I have always been an optimist."

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

On the possibility of an agreement being reached at tomorrow's meeting, Syed Hamid said: "We always hope for an immediate end because we don't think these issues should remain outstanding. But it needs a lot of goodwill and understanding from both sides."

Syed Hamid said some progress had been made since Lee's visit last year.

"They are now discussing more specific things, looking at areas they could agree on. Before, we just wanted the broad term of the package to be agreed upon.

"Now it is on what can be done to find the solutions (to issues) like the KTMB, pricing of water, in what form it should be, from which rivers it should come from, etc."

Earlier, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak, who had a 45-minute meeting with Lee, said the Senior Minister expressed hope his visit would help expedite the search for a solution to the problems.

Najib said he and Lee shared the view that more meetings and visits by leaders of both countries should be held to foster better ties.

"Leaders at all levels should spend more time together where issues and problems can be discussed."

He said Malaysia-Singapore ties were on very strong fundamental footing, but admitted there were areas where they competed against each other, including the economy.

Najib said that Singapore shared Malaysia's concern over activities of militant and extremist groups bent on toppling the Government through violence.

He said the republic was concerned over the effects of militancy as the

city state would also be affected if its neighbours were in trouble.

"I briefed him on the threats posed by militant groups in Malaysia and measures that we have taken. We are doing our best to check the problem ... we are on top of it."

He said measures to combat militancy had to be carried out continuously, adding that no one should take for granted the threats it posed. This is because such activities could crop up again later.

Najib said Lee viewed the issue of Islamic militancy as a worldwide phenomenon, alluding to what had happened in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Kashmir.

"He felt there is a growing trend towards a more radical and militant way in propogating Islam. At the same time, he praised Malaysia's moderate and tolerant position on Islam."