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On right track towards improving ties with S'pore

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DATUK Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's visit to Singapore last week, his first since becoming Deputy Prime Minister, was not to seek to resolve all outstanding issues between Malaysia and the island republic.

But as the second man in the present Malaysian Government, he could not help but touch on the issues during his meeting with Singaporean leaders.

Although Abdullah and members of the Malaysian delegation were merely discussing the issues to provide views as parameters to solve other differences, the message to their Singaporean counterparts was clear - resolve all the issues in one package instead of separately.

During a joint press conference between Abdullah and Singapore Premier Goh Chok Tong last Wednesday, the latter had indicated that Singapore agreed in principle to Malaysia's proposal to relocate the KTM Bhd railway station from Tanjong Pagar to Kranji instead of Bukit Timah or Woodlands.

This may shed some light on the relocation of the KTM station, which houses the Customs, Immigration and Quarantine departments, but as Malaysia has reiterated, the outstanding issues should be resolved in a package and not one after another.

Issues regarding the relocation of the KTM station may be solved, but as Malaysia puts it, there is still work to be done so that the other issues may also be settled.

In fact, both Malaysia and Singapore had agreed to settle the issues in a package and not separately. This was concluded in a meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Goh in Hanoi in December 1998.

As such, this understanding had superseded the points of agreement (POA) signed between the then Singapore Premier Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysian Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin in 1990.

Singapore claimed that under the POA, Malaysia had been given until February 10 2001 to relocate the KTM station from Tanjong Pagar to Woodlands, five years after Singapore completed and ran its MRT station in Woodlands in 1996.

However, based on the new arrangement signed in Hanoi, the deadline does not exist.

In fact, Malaysia had proposed an alternative, that is, to move from Tanjong Pagar to Kranji during the Hanoi meeting. Goh said Singapore agreed to this in principle, but wanted the station to be linked with Johor through a tunnel which would be linked with the MRT railway line.

However, Malaysia had not made the move and told Singapore that it needed time to study the details on the proposed move.

Why chose to relocate the KTM station to Kranji? There has yet to be an answer. Analysts say the relocation of the station will help develop Kranji and its surrounding area. They add that Kranji is currently full of vegetable and pig farms.

Another reason is that Singapore badly needs to occupy the land in Tanjong Pagar to expand the already congested Keppel Port. Furthermore, the land area in Tanjong Pagar is considered prime land.

Singapore's agreement in principle to Malaysia's request has opened a new chapter in attempts to resolve the whole issue.

It is a positive sign but officials of both countries need to work hard to ensure that all issues are resolved. Besides the relocation of the KTM station, other nagging issues include the sale of water to Singapore, the

use of Malaysian air space by the Singapore Air Force, and withdrawals from the Central Provident Fund by Malaysians working in the republic.

And with the relationship between Malaysia and Singapore further cemented following Abdullah's visit, there are signs that all the issues will be resolved as soon as possible.

As Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said, Abdullah managed to touch ground with the Singaporean leaders to foster strong inter personal relations.

"There are already contact points made between the new generations of both countries for a lasting relationship.

"There may be hiccups in the bilateral relations between the two countries but it would not worsen to a point where there is no contact at all, as there are already efforts to cement ties at all levels, including with politicians, civil servants, students and businessmen as well," he had said.

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