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Lee-Agreement

S'PORE AGREED TO RESOLVE ISSUES TO AVOID DEALING WITH NON UMNO-LED GOVT

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 5 (Bernama) -- Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew said today Singapore reached an agreement with Malaysia to resolve outstanding bilateral issues to avoid the possibility of dealing with a partner other than the Umno-led government that can prove to be problematic.

While saying that Singapore had not given in easily, he felt that the deal could have been better for the island republic.

"Supposing we don't make a deal and things developed in an unexpected way in Malaysia, for instance heaven forbid in 2004 you don't have an Umno-led coalition, then you've got a new partner to negotiate with. That's more problematic," he told a media conference at the end of his four-day visit to Malaysia.

However, Lee said that from his meetings with Malaysians, including members of the media here, this situation was very unlikely.

Lee was responding to questions on the agreement in principle to resolve the outstanding issues, reached yesterday during talks involving him and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The outstanding issues include the sale of water to Singapore, the points of agreement for the development of railway land owned by KTM Bhd, and the status of Malaysian Customs, Immigration and Quarantine facility at the KTM station in Tanjung Pagar.

The other issues concern the use of Malaysian airspace by the Republic of Singapore Air Force and the withdrawals from Singapore's Central Provident Fund by workers from Peninsular Malaysia.

Lee was asked to comment, among others, on the possibility that Singaporeans would question why the republic would have to settle for less water for more money and on the general feeling that Singapore had conceded much to iron out the problems involving the water supply and KTM-owned land, in the agreement.

The Singapore senior statesman said the issues had been going on for several years even before the regional economic crisis and whatever that had been agreed upon was the result of a compromise.

"We could stand firm and wait for events to develop but we might be dealing with a government that would not deliver," he said.

On the water supply, Lee said Singapore had asked for 750 million gallons (one gallon equals about 4.5 litres) of water per day from Malaysia beyond 2061 but this was reduced to 350 million gallons.

To a question, Lee said he did not think that Malaysia would "turn off" the tap easily.

"I'm not sure what a crazy government would do but no rational government would want to take steps that would lead to the intervention of the UN Security Council and action by us.

"I mean it is not something that you do without consequences. A deal is a deal," he said.

Lee urged both sides to move on and implement what had been agreed upon.

Asked on his prediction of post-Mahathir political situation in Malaysia, Lee said one of the objectives of his visit here was precisely to get a reading on that matter.

"I think I've got a whole series of readings which will be in reports to the cabinet which I should not be freely discussing here," he said.

However, Lee said he was informed by Malaysian pressmen that it was unlikely for PAS to come to power in the next general election, due in 2004, although it was possible that Umno might lose further ground.

On why it was him and not Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong who came to Malaysia in efforts to resolve the bilateral issues, Lee said Goh and Dr Mahathir had tried over a period of years to resolve the problems but were not able to strike a balance.

"So remembering the way I was able to reach an agreement through (former Finance Minister) Tun Daim (Zainuddin) with Dr Mahathir, I asked my prime minister whether he would like me to try. He said yes, go ahead,"

Lee last visited Malaysia in August last year during which his discussions with Dr Mahathir also centred on ways to find a solution to the outstanding issues.

On Islamic militancy, he said some elements had launched attacks against targets like the World Trade Centre in New York and an American naval vessel in Aden, Yemen.

"I think there will be a flow of this and we'll have to watch this carefully because if they take root in Indonesia... Malaysia and come down to Johor, then we are vulnerable. So, it's not something which we view with disinterest," he added.

-- BERNAMA

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