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Singapore-Malaysia

SINGAPORE, MALAYSIA CLOSER TO RESOLVING OUTSTANDING ISSUES

By: Tham Choy Lin

SINGAPORE, March 13 (Bernama) -- Singapore and Malaysia have taken a step forward towards resolving their package of outstanding bilateral issues, Singapore Foreign Minister S.Jayakumar told Parliament today.

He said ties between both countries have also improved.

Jayakumar said his ministry had received a letter dated Feb 21 on the matter from Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

"We are still studying it. Our preliminary study shows that there are variations on some points between Dr Mahathir's reply and Senior Minister's understanding with Dr Mahathir during his visit to Kuala Lumpur last year," said Jayakumar.

But the differences "do not appear that great", he said in reply to queries from seven Members of Parliament on Singapore-Malaysia bilateral ties which dominated the debate on his ministry's budget estimate.

Jayakumar said Singapore will examine the proposed price of continued water supply from Malaysia which currently sells raw water under two existing agreements expiring in 2011 and 2061, respectively.

"We have to study the proposed price at which we purchase water from Malaysia under a new agreement that will cover the period 2011 and 2061 and for the period after 2061 when the Johor river agreement ends.

"Another matter is the mix of treated and raw water although the volume and quantum will remain the same," he said.

On when the package will be resolved, Jayakumar said he hoped it will be finalised in the coming months through a give-and-take policy which has drawn both sides closer to a settlement.

"Both sides are keen to resolve the package of bilateral issues as soon as possible so that we can put these issues behind us. Although there is no specific timeframe set, I wish to assure this House that there is a sense of urgency on both sides, this is a step forward," he said.

The water issue is a crucial component of the package which has weighed down ties over the last few years.

It also includes the relocation of a Malaysian customs checkpoint at the Malaysian-owned Tanjung Pagar railway station here, development of railway land in Singapore owned by Malaysia, pension savings of Malaysians in Singapore and also the use of Malaysian airspace by the Singapore air force.

He said Singapore had agreed in principle to Malaysia's proposals to move the railway station in Tanjung Pagar to Kranji, also located here, and the construction of an underground rail link between Johor Baharu and Kranji.

Jayakumar, who described bilateral ties as "holding" a year ago, said the atmosphere has improved not only after Lee's visit to Kuala Lumpur but also by the recent visit of Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to the island republic last month.

He said there was a hiccup over Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's recent comments on Malays but "it did not change the overall tone of the improving relationship."

Goh caused outrage across the causeway when he said Malays in Singapore were better off than their Malaysian counterparts.

Meanwhile, two members of Parliament asked the government to step up exchanges not only between top officials but also between young groups and

civil servants to promote better understanding of each other.
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