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The handshake says it all

THE agreement to resolve the outstanding issues between Malaysia and Singapore puts to rest the hiccups in their relations, paving the way for a higher level of engagement. It thus comes as a great relief and must be welcomed by all who have the interest of the two close neighbours at heart.

It is a tribute to the statesmanship of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who jointly chaired the bilateral discussions. It is also a testimony of the underlying strength that binds the two countries and their people.

The issues, of which there are five, have been standing in the way of warmer ties for a long time. We hope the officials who are entrusted with the task of giving flesh to the agreement that has been agreed in principle and who will be working out the fine print in the final agreement will undertake the task as expeditiously as possible.

The issues comprise a diverse range of matters. They relate to the sale of water to Singapore, the points of agreement for the development of the railway land owned by KTM Bhd and the status of the Malaysian Customs, Immigration and Quarantine facilities at the KTMB station in Tanjung Pagar.

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

What is also significant is that after initial reservations from Singapore when the idea was first mooted, both sides have now accepted Malaysia's proposal to build a bridge linking the two countries and demolish the Causeway after the new link is completed in 2007.

The agreement takes on added significance as it comes at a time when Malaysia and Singapore should work closer together to face the world economic slowdown. Although the two countries complement each other in some areas of their economies, there are also areas in which there is bound to be some competition, for instance in attracting foreign investment in the advanced electronic and IT sectors.

But we should regard this as a form of "friendly competition" because ultimately it is the foreign investors who will decide where the conditions suit them best.

Malaysia and Singapore have to live harmoniously despite the differences that may crop up occasionally. It would be unrealistic to expect a problem-free relationship because even among close friends, differences can arise. These can flare up unexpectedly and when we least expect them. But what is important is that both sides keep the problems in perspective and prevent them from undermining their close relations. In a region where peace and harmony is an elusive commodity, it is imperative that the friendship between Malaysia and Singapore remains steadfast. The well-being of their people depends on it. There have been contentious issues in the past between Malaysia and Singapore but sincerity and an excellent personal rapport between their leaders have managed to keep the problems from worsening and differences were overcome together in a spirit of give and take.

This spirit is reflected in Lee's statement at a news conference on the agreement when he said: "I would say it's been a tough deal because Dr Mahathir is not somebody that you can take for granted. He has driven me

back as far as I can go." And Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said both sides acted on the "basis of reciprocity".

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