

Wrong to say KL has lost right to review water price

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News commentary by
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WHEN Singapore officials sit down for their meeting in Johor Baru today to discuss a water price revision with their Malaysian counterparts, they need to ask themselves whether they are serious in finding a solution to an issue which has been dragging since 1999.

Or, are they going to start quibbling on the legal terms and yet again question Malaysia's right for a price review of the water sold to the island republic?

Since negotiations started, Malaysia, according to Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, has not quite understood the "language" Singapore used.

Syed Hamid said Singapore wanted a win-win formula and it meant exactly that - Singapore wanted to win on all counts. This was contrary to Malaysia's understanding that any solution should be mutually beneficial.

"We have been very accommodating to Singapore's request at every level. But Malaysia has yet to see that Singapore has the intention to discuss the details for a price revision.

"We have come to a decision for a review but in every meeting, they said we have lost the right to review, so there is that psychological thing that they put on us," he said.

Leaders of both countries had in late 1998 agreed that five issues, including water, be negotiated as a package. Officials were given the task to talk but negotiations

reached a stalemate in 1999 until Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew came to Kuala Lumpur last year to meet Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The foreign ministers were then mandated to resolve the package of issues and after their second meeting last month, officials were directed to discuss the water price review.

In other words, it is back to square one.

"Malaysia has always tried to find a solution through dialogues and negotiations and for that reason the Prime Minister offered these bilateral issues to be resolved as a package because we thought that there is benefit to that.

"But if they are being difficult on the core issue (water), then how are we going to resolve this?" Syed

Hamid asked.

Dr Mahathir sent a letter to Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong last week in which he said Malaysia wanted to discontinue the package approach in the negotiations. Goh has yet to reply.

Goh, during his visit to Kuala Lumpur last week, said that Singapore while agreeing to the price revision of water sold to the island republic wanted to know the "basis" for Malaysia's action.

Syed Hamid said he failed to understand why Singapore was asking for a basis when Malaysia had explained it many times.

"We have been saying that we have the legal right to do so. But they are telling us we have no right to a review.

"The point is the clauses in the (two) agreements which provide for Malaysia to review (prices) after 25 years. So what does that mean? It could be anytime after 25 years," he added.

The two water agreements were signed in 1961 and 1962. Singapore currently pays three sen per 1,000 gallons of raw water from Johor.

Syed Hamid said Malaysia had submitted a new price formula at the last meeting and hoped Singapore would give its feedback.

"The ball is no longer at Malaysia's feet. If they do not want to meet, then say so. If Singapore wants us to believe they want to resolve (the issue) but put up impediments and obstacles, it is going to be difficult," he added.

The water issue is not an insoluble one. It is quite straight-forward but Singapore seems to be intent on muddying the waters.