

# Water talks with S'pore back on track

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By MERGAWATI  
ZULFAKAR

PUTRAJAYA: Malaysia is ready to discuss water and other issues in the bilateral package being negotiated with Singapore separately.

"We have no problem discussing it separately. That has always been our position," Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said here yesterday.

Syed Hamid was responding to a Singapore statement on Tuesday that it has agreed to discuss water and other issues separately.

A Singapore Foreign Ministry spokesman was quoted as saying that since Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad insisted on treating water separately and discontinuing the package approach, the trade-offs were no longer possible.

Apart from water, the other four issues involve the use of Malaysian airspace by Singapore's air force, withdrawal of money belonging to Peninsular Malaysians from Singapore's Central Provident Fund, development of KTM Berhad land in Singapore and relocation of Malaysia's Customs, Immigration and Quarantine facilities in Singapore.

Dr Mahathir had written to his counterpart Goh Chok Tong last week, stating Malaysia's decision to discontinue the package approach.

The spokesman said Goh had given a reply on Monday.

Syed Hamid said Singapore's latest decision was the response Kuala Lumpur was waiting for.

"Each issue has its own peculiarity, so we have to discuss it separately."

Both Dr Mahathir and Goh had agreed in December 1998 that both countries should discuss the issues in a package but when ministers and officials met several times on the package since 1999, no progress was achieved.

In Johor Baru, LAM LI reports that senior officials

from both sides meeting as a follow-up to the two ministerial meetings in July and September had disagreed on what the theme of their meeting should be.

Initially, the two-day meeting at the Hyatt Regency Hotel was to have had the theme "Senior Officials Meeting On The Price Review of Raw Water Between Malaysia and Singapore."

But a few hours later, the theme was changed to read "Senior Officials Meeting On The Water Issue Between Malaysia and Singapore." Apparently, Singapore had requested the change

There was no official statement behind the change but sources said Singapore had objected to the meeting being solely about "raw water" and "price review."

Some clues could be found in Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release on the eve of the meeting, which stated that there were two aspects to the water issue. "First, the price of current raw and treated water under existing agreements (1961 and 1962) and second, the price of future water after 2061 upon the expiry of the 1962 Water Agreement."

The statement said Singa-

pore had already told Malaysia that with NEWater, it was prepared to let the 1961 agreement lapse.

The Malaysian delegation was led by the Foreign Ministry's secretary-general Datuk Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak.

His Singapore counterpart was Foreign Affairs Ministry Permanent Secretary Tan Chin Tiong.

Officials were tight-lipped about the discussions when asked by reporters during one of their breaks.

Ahmad Fuzi said: "We are trying hard. We may issue a statement tomorrow (today)."