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PM: Malaysia always ready to refer island issue to ICJ

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Malaysia has always been ready to refer the Pulau Batu Puteh dispute to the International Court of Justice, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said Kuala Lumpur had been ready with the necessary documents for arbitration since 1998, when Malaysia and Singapore agreed in principle to refer the dispute to the ICJ.

"But although (Singapore) agreed in 1998, they have yet to come up with the necessary documentation to support their claim, and owing to this, the dispute cannot be solved through the ICJ yet," Dr Mahathir said, responding to a Singapore Foreign Ministry statement yesterday expressing the island republic's readiness to sign and ratify a special agreement to pave the way for the dispute to be brought before the ICJ.

"This has been the case since 1998," Dr Mahathir noted. "It's about time (we settled this dispute) and we are ready," he said.

The Prime Minister was speaking at a Press conference after attending a Christmas hightea reception at the Calvary Church in Bukit Damansara this afternoon.

On the incident yesterday in the waters near Pulau Batu Puteh, in which a Malaysian Marine Police patrol boat was chased away by a Singaporean naval vessel, Dr Mahathir said Wisma Putra would consider sending a protest note to the Singaporean Government over the incident.

Dr Mahathir said that the Singapore authorities were acting in such a manner because they thought that the island belonged to them.

"That is why they are chasing away our fishermen and even our Marine Police," he said, adding that it was improper of Singapore to do so when the ownership claim was in dispute.

Dr Mahathir said it was only proper for Singapore to stop all activities on the island and wait for an ICJ ruling, if they sincerely wanted a solution to the dispute.

Asked if Malaysia would seek an interim order from the ICJ to compel Singapore to maintain the status quo of the island pending the court's decision, Dr Mahathir said it was possible but according to the ICJ's working mechanism, this must also have the consent of both nations.

"Pulau Batu Puteh is important to us because it is our territory. We don't take into consideration whether it is a source of oil or whatever.

"Our country is our country and we cannot allow people to take any part of our country," Dr Mahathir stressed when asked why the island was important to Malaysia.

At the same Press conference, Dr Mahathir also confirmed that Malaysia was no longer interested in engaging in discussions with Singapore on the supply of water as there had been no progress in the many meetings so far.

"So, if we don't discuss, then we will have to arbitrate. We are looking into arbitration because we are not making any progress.

"We have discussed this at the Cabinet level on several occasions and we always thought that we could get some agreement from Singapore, but we don't see it coming," Dr Mahathir said, adding that Singapore was going back on its word by saying that Malaysia had lost its right to a price review.

Dr Mahathir said the matter might reach a stalemate if Singapore refused to accept that Malaysia had the right of a price review now and declined to take the case to arbitration.

"Even for arbitration, Singapore must also agree," he observed. "If Singapore does not want to arbitrate, then there will be a stalemate. If they don't agree it will be very difficult, because we cannot continue to sell water to them based on a 1927 pricing," he said.

Asked if Malaysia would cease supplying water to the republic if the matter reached a deadlock, Dr Mahathir said that Kuala Lumpur would not act in such a manner but would ensure that the supplied water was only for domestic purposes and not commercial.

"We don't see why we should supply them with water for their commercial purposes. They sell water to ships at the rate of S\$20 (RM44) per 1,000 gallons of treated water, while they buy 1,000 gallons of raw water (from Malaysia) at three cents ...they are making a huge profit while we are on the losing end.

"We don't think that we should contribute that much money to their coffers," he said.

The Prime Minister said that bilateral relations need not be affected if Singapore acted professionally and adhered to the existing international laws on territorial disputes.