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PM: Singapore changing stand

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said if Malaysia had no legal right to review prices in the two water supply agreements, Singapore should not have suggested a price revision in the first place.

He said Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew had met him twice and on both occasions proposed that the price of water sold be revised to 15 sen per 1,000 gallons from the present three sen.

Malaysia, however, had proposed 60 sen.

"(If we are not allowed to review the price,) then he (Lee) shouldn't have come at all. He shouldn't talk to me at all. They are changing their minds. Now they are becoming very legalistic," said Dr Mahathir who is also Umno president, after opening Puteri Umno's first general assembly today.

The Government, he said, was looking at its next move following the statement by Singapore Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar in its Parliament yesterday that Singapore would challenge the price review.

Jayakumar was quoted as saying that under the 1961 and 1962 agreements, Johor, from which the water was sourced, should have invoked the review clauses in 1986 and 1987, and now Malaysia had lost the right to do so.

On the possibility of Malaysia taking the case to the International Court of Justice, Dr Mahathir said it was not in Malaysia's interest to do so now.

As an example, he said, Malaysia's and Singapore's claim on Pulau Batu Putih was to be heard by the ICJ but it has been delayed, partly due to Singapore not being prepared to present its case.

"In the meantime, water will be sold at three sen per 1,000 gallons," he said.

Asked if international agreements could be changed, Dr Mahathir said this had happened in the past with some countries even going to war because of this. He then clarified that he was not hinting at the prospect of war with the republic, but merely giving examples.

He added that the Government would look into the implications if Malaysia breached the agreements.

Commenting on a proposed law to protect natural resources in the country, including water, he said the Government would look into it.

"We want to study the agreements to determine if it is so binding that even unfairness can be perpetuated."

He reiterated that the Government would not change its stand to settle the water issue individually, and not part of a package which included other items like contributions to the Central Provident Fund and use of Malaysian air space.

Meanwhile, Bernama quotes Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar as saying that the water issue may have to be resolved in court.

"If you talk about the fact that there is no right to review, that is a legal position, let it be resolved in the court of law," he said.

Syed Hamid said that the attitude of Singapore which was fond of giving publicity that tended to undermine the integrity of Malaysia's leadership through parliamentary question and answers or through the media, was not good for bilateral relations.

Syed Hamid said that when Malaysia started providing water to Singapore in 1927, which was part of the Strait Settlements then, the intention was

to supply Singapore as an island which did not have drinking water.

He said that Singapore had profited from the water which was not only used for drinking but also for industry and other purposes.

"We do not complain but what we want is an equitable and fair price for our water," he said.