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Backbenchers Club protests Singapore's activities on island

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The Backbenchers Club has prepared a protest note to the Singapore High Commission over Singapore's move to start construction work on Pulau Batu Putih, off Johor.

Club chairman Datuk Mohd Zin Mohamad said today that the note was handed over to Wisma Putra to be passed on to the commission.

"We strongly object to Singapore's move to carry out construction work as the dispute between Malaysia and Singapore over Pulau Batu Putih has yet to be settled.

"This could be termed as illegal. Singapore should understand that they do not own the rights of Pulau Batu Putih and that they cannot do just as they please."

He said that the action could jeopardise the relationship between both countries.

"It shows that they are blatantly disregarding the spirit of neighbourliness among Asean countries.

"They should stop such work as it is illegal and not under their jurisdiction. We strongly protest their move," he said at a Press conference at the club's Hari Raya open house.

Yesterday, it was reported that Singapore was carrying out construction work on Pulau Batu Putih to build a two-storey complex and helicopter landing terminal.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said last week that Malaysia would bring the dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) after Singapore had set a date for both parties to sign an agreement to enable the ICJ to look into it.

Pulau Batu Putih, a small rocky out-crop located 15 nautical miles off Pengerang, Johor, is claimed by Singapore, which calls it Pedro Branca.

The decision to bring the dispute to the ICJ was reached at a meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong in Langkawi in September last year.

Singapore first showed its intention to stake a claim to the island in 1989 when it stopped Malaysian fishermen from fishing near the island. The special agreement is the first step to begin the legal process at the ICJ, which is the judicial arm of the United Nations.

On the statement by Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) chairman Tan Sri Abu Talib Othman that Members of Parliament had failed to debate Suhakam's 2000/2001 reports tabled recently in Parliament, Zin said: "There is no truth in such claims as our records show that Suhakam issues are frequently discussed in Parliament.

"They have been many resolutions which we have used to discuss human rights issues, especially involving the Internal Security Act, which we feel is the best method to fight terrorism."

Abu Talib had said the human rights issues in the report, if debated in Parliament, would help to further create awareness of human rights in the country.

Zin also said that the Government had allocated RM49 million for renovations at Parliament House, which started last month and would be completed in February 2004.

He said the last time that Parliament House underwent renovations was in 1985.

The renovations to the lobby and assembly hall will increase the number

of seats for MPs from 212 to 237.