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PM: Only ICJ can decide island's owner

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Only the International Court of Justice can decide who owns Pulau Batu Puteh, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

"It is not for us but the ICJ to decide. As far as we are concerned, Pulau Batu Puteh belongs to us, but I am quite sure that they (Singapore) will dispute us the way we dispute their claim," he said, adding that the best people to judge the issue were those not directly involved in the dispute.

"Partisans cannot pass judgment," he told reporters after being briefed on preparations for the 13th Non-Aligned Movement Summit at the Putra World Trade Centre today. Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar was present.

Singapore and Malaysia are involved in a dispute over Pulau Batu Puteh, which Singapore calls Pedra Branca, a rocky outcrop 15 nautical miles from Pengerang, Johor.

The Singapore Foreign Affairs Ministry has stated that the Singapore Government and its predecessors have occupied and exercised full sovereignty over the rocky outcrop and the waters around it since the 1840s.

Singapore media reports have said that the island republic has also administered the Horsburgh Light-house located on it.

Asked when he expected Singapore to sign the special agreement to take the case to the ICJ, Dr Mahathir said "very soon", stressing that "very soon" did not mean "10 years from now".

"As far as we are concerned, immediately.

"There is no reason for any delay at all. We are prepared, and Singapore being quite an efficient country, I am quite sure, has been prepared for quite a long time."

Later, Syed Hamid said that Singapore should quickly sign the special agreement so that the issue could be settled once and for all.

"We have agreed at the highest levels that we cannot settle this through diplomacy and negotiations. We have prepared our case and are ready to sign the special agreement. This case is long overdue."

Syed Hamid added that Singapore had no right to stop Malaysians from moving around the island and its surrounding waters as Malaysia continued to consider the island its territory.

"They have no right to stop our people from moving around the area and they should be not be making aggressive manoeuvres there either. We will continue to consider the island ours until a decision is made by the ICJ."

Syed Hamid also said that it was not right for Singapore to assert that Malaysia was making inaccurate statements regarding its sovereignty over the island as Malaysia also claimed the island as its own.

On reports that the special agreement was supposed to have been signed during proposed water talks taking place in November and December, Syed Hamid said he had wanted to sign the special agreement at a meeting on water, but that Singapore had refused.

"They did not want the water talks to include the special agreement.

"So we suggested a few dates to them. But I have not heard their response to those suggestions. Some of the dates they said were not suitable so we are still waiting," he said.