

22/01/2002

Discussions with Singapore stalled due to water issue

Ramlan Said

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Discussions between Malaysia and Singapore on a broad range of issues have stalled since both countries failed to agree on the sale of water to Singapore.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today Malaysian and Singaporean officials had made little progress in resolving the issues.

"Yes, I must admit that we have not made much progress," the Prime Minister said at a Press conference after opening Puteri Umno's community centre at Taman Sri Manja, off Jalan Klang Lama.

He was asked about the progress made by officials tasked to fine-tune details of an agreement reached last September to resolve several issues.

Malaysia, he said, was hopeful the final agreement could be signed as soon as possible as any delay would not benefit the country which was selling water to Singapore at a low price.

On when the final agreement would be signed, Dr Mahathir said Singapore would not settle for anything else before the price of water was determined.

"We are asking for a very reasonable price ... we (now) charge only three sen per 1,000 gallons. Meanwhile, they are selling to ships 1,000 gallons of treated water at S\$20 (RM42). You can see the margin."

Asked whether Singapore's refusal to back down from its stand had caused the delay, Dr Mahathir said: "According to the (September) agreement, we must agree on the new price, and we have not agreed on the new price."

On whether the discussions had reached a deadlock, he said: "Not yet, we are still going to discuss."

To a suggestion that the officials should not be facing problems as leaders of both countries had come to an agreement, Dr Mahathir said he believed in adopting a give-and-take attitude.

"I agree an agreement has been reached at the political level but we have to stick to certain terms so that we don't lose out. Malaysia has been selling water at three sen since the 60s and buying treated water at 50 sen.

"They sell treated water to us and the money obtained is used to pay for the raw water. Practically, they get the raw water free."

Dr Mahathir ruled out the possibility of him meeting Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew again to discuss the matter. "No, that stage is over. It is now for the officials to decide."

The agreement between Malaysia and Singapore was reached during bilateral discussions jointly chaired by Dr Mahathir and Lee.

The two countries agreed that officials from both sides would work out the details of a final agreement which would be signed by the Prime Ministers of both countries.

The outstanding issues are the sale of water to Singapore, the points of agreement for the development of railway land owned by KTM Bhd and the status of the Malaysian Customs, Immigration and Quarantine facility at the KTMB station in Tanjong Pagar.

Two other issues concern the use of Malaysian air space by the Singapore Air Force and withdrawals from Singapore's Central Provident Fund by workers from Peninsular Malaysia.

Both sides also agreed to a proposal by Malaysia to construct a new bridge linking the two countries and demolish the Causeway after the completion of the bridge in 2007.

No time frame was given for the signing of the final agreement.

On another matter, Dr Mahathir said there might be a new law or amendment to stop kindergartens from spreading the culture of hatred against the Government.

He said the Government discovered that many kindergartens had deviated from their religious objectives. These kindergartens have been found to teach their charges to hate certain people and the Government.

On the number of kindergartens doing that, he said the practice was quite widespread.

"The young children are being poisoned by these people."

In Pakistan, Dr Mahathir said the Government had closed down many madrasah because they were being used to teach people to topple the Government.

On why the local errant kindergartens were not closed, Dr Mahathir said the authorities had to ascertain if offences had been committed.

He said it was difficult to monitor these centres.

On whether Pas would be stopped from setting up madrasah, he said: "If we discover they are teaching something else other than religion, teaching the people how to break the law as had happened in Pakistan, we will have to consider whether to allow them to do so."

On the Puteri Umno community centre, it aims to provide more educational resources for children from low-income families.

Under this pilot project, English and Jawi tuition classes have been set up.

The New Straits Times will provide "Newspaper in Education" classes once a week for three months to pupils from Standard One to Standard Three.

Puteri Umno has plans to establish 165 such centres nationwide.  
ramlans@nstp.com.my

(END)