

28/12/2002

Singapore's behaviour over Pulau Batu Puteh dispute is truly unfriendly

Shamsul Akmar

WHEN Singapore, in March this year, was described as "an irritating pimple that would not burst", the republic's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong took offence.

The pimple analogy was not the first of its kind. Former Indonesian President B.J. Habibie has described the republic as "a small red spot".

These analogies were used to describe the manner in which Singapore has behaved towards its close neighbours - a manner that is anything but neighbourly.

Goh, in response, had remarked that Malaysians were probably irritated by Singapore's refusal to play the role of younger brother to Malaysia.

He had then said it was up to Singaporeans to prove that the "pimple" was actually a sweetener, and the "little red spot" a gem.

It has been 10 months since the tiff over the land reclamation project by Singapore affected Malaysia, and much water - old and new - has flowed under the Causeway.

If Malaysians expected that Singapore would transform from an "irritating pimple" to the "sweetener" as envisaged by Goh, they must be disappointed.

That pimple obviously did not transform. Neither did it change from a little red spot to a gem.

The latest tiff between Malaysia and Singapore over the disputed Pulau Batu Puteh, or Pedra Branca as Singapore prefers it to be called, is neither sweet nor a gem of an issue.

No doubt both nations have overlapping claims and, based on the exchanges between the two, the dispute should be settled by the International Court of Justice.

The dispute is not about which nation has the right to the small rocky outcrop located about 15 nautical miles off Penggerang, Johor.

It is about how Malaysia and Singapore should treat the island while waiting for the ICJ to convene ownership proceedings.

Singapore first showed its intention of staking a claim on Pulau Batu Puteh in 1989, when its marine authorities stopped several Malaysian fishermen from fishing near the island.

The latest round of controversy over the island cropped up when Singapore decided to build new structures and increase patrols around it.

Not only were Malaysian fishermen turned away from fishing grounds near the island, but a Malaysian marine police boat with journalists on board was recently chased away by a Singaporean naval vessel.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, when asked to comment on Singapore's behaviour, said Malaysia would not deploy armed forces personnel or warships to keep watch over the island.

He said Malaysia did not intend to go to war with anyone and would not take any action which would lead to a confrontation.

Singapore, in a statement through its Foreign Ministry, claimed that Malaysia had no right to question its activities on Pulau Batu Puteh.

Its spokesman argued that Malaysia had undertaken similar action over the Sipadan and Ligitan islands in its dispute with Indonesia, which the ICJ recently ruled belonged to Malaysia.

The Singapore Foreign Ministry further contended that the republic had exercised its sovereign rights on the island since the island was named Pedra Branca in the 1840s.

In short, Singapore does not feel that building new structures or behaving as if Pulau Batu Puteh belongs to it is wrong, nor has it given any indication of stopping such activities pending a decision by the ICJ.

Here lies the problem with Singapore, popularly known within the region as having the kiasu mentality.

Instead of addressing the issue that the island is still in dispute, Singapore has chosen to drag in Sipadan and Ligitan, an issue that has been settled by the ICJ and the decision accepted graciously by both Malaysia and Indonesia.

That is truly going off on a tangent as the Sipadan and Ligitan issue has been resolved.

The statement from the Singapore Foreign Ministry has obviously been made in bad faith, as it is trying to drag the settled Malaysia/Indonesia claims into its own dispute with Malaysia.

Is Singapore hoping to raise Indonesia's ire so that it can then have an "ally" in its dispute with Malaysia?

Goh, when criticised 10 months ago, claimed that it was Singapore's refusal to play the role of younger brother to Malaysia which had led to the current circumstances.

The republic's behaviour is not about being a younger or older brother but that of an arrogant neighbour who does not care less for those living next door.

What if Malaysia too decides to act like-wise?

If Singapore chooses to chase away a Malaysian marine police boat, then probably it is time to send Malaysia's own patrol boats to do likewise to Singapore's patrol boats.

Perhaps the Malaysian authorities should start chasing away Singapore cars crossing the Causeway.

But where does that lead to, other than more hostility, hatred and distrust?

The question is whether Singapore is bothered by all this.

Singapore's behaviour over Pulau Batu Puteh is truly a display of the republic's unfriendly attitude.

That established, Goh and other Singaporean leaders should stop taking offence at the "little red spot" or "irritating pimple" analogies being used to describe the small island republic.

The irritating pimple will only go away after it bursts. If not, perhaps some sweetener may help improve its disposition.