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Singapore must sign pact before dispute goes to ICJ

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Malaysia will only bring the dispute over Pulau Batu Putih to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) after Singapore has set a date for both parties to sign a special agreement to enable the ICJ to look into it.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Najib Abdul Razak said today that Malaysia was basically ready to proceed to claim the island but can only do so after Singapore agrees to it.

"We want to proceed with the matter as soon as possible and we are prepared to take the issue up to the ICJ. We are waiting for Singapore to set the date to sign the agreement as there are some technical aspects which we have to go through," said Najib at a Press conference after presenting a talk entitled "Malaysian Politics at the Beginning of the 21st Century" at Universiti Malaya.

Najib was asked to comment on the issue following the decision by the ICJ on Tuesday to award Pulau Sipadan and Ligatan to Malaysia over Indonesia, which also had staked a claim to the two islands.

He said that Malaysia had a strong case and was confident that it would be given the rights to the island, which was a small rocky out-crop located about 15 nautical miles off Pengerang, Johor.

The island is also being 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.

Najib who is Umno vice-president also expressed his surprise over the Pas-led Terengganu State Government's move to increase the salary of the Menteri Besar, executive council members and assemblymen as tabled during the State assembly sitting yesterday.

"They claim they have no money to administer the State or to pay back debts to the Federal Government. And they say that this is the reason why they cannot carry out development projects.

"If that is the situation, I wonder where they got the money to overcome expenses for the additional payment.

"There is no need for them to increase the salary, that too by 20 per cent, which is a rather big amount."

Earlier in his speech, Najib said that Umno has already started the process of re-inventing itself as the party had to keep up with the changing times.