

24/12/2002

Singapore's actions unethical (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Mon. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Singapore has gone beyond accepted norms by carrying out construction and development work on Pulau Batu Putih when ownership of the island is in dispute.

But, "short of going to war", there was little Malaysia could do to deal with the situation, he added.

Commenting on reports of physical development and construction activities being carried out in earnest by Singapore on the island, he said the republic did not always observe normal international custom and because of this, Malaysia always had lots of problems dealing with its southern neighbour.

"When we deal with Singapore, we often face problems because it goes beyond accepted norms. By right, when the ownership of the island is in dispute, there should not be development or construction activities there.

"Like in Sipadan and Ligitan. We stopped all development projects on these islands until the dispute between us and Indonesia was resolved by the International Court of Justice."

The Prime Minister said this in an exclusive interview with the New Straits Times and Berita Harian at his Ministry of Finance office this morning.

Malaysia and Singapore are locked in a territorial dispute over Pulau Batu Putih, a small rocky outcrop located 15 nautical miles off Pengerang, Johor.

Both sides have agreed to bring the dispute to the ICJ following a meeting between Dr Mahathir and his Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong in Langkawi in September last year.

Singapore first showed its intention to stake its claim on the island in 1989 when its forces stopped Malaysian fishermen from fishing near the island.

It has been reported that despite both countries agreeing to take the matter to the ICJ, Singapore is rapidly increasing its physical presence on the island by constructing new buildings and a helipad.

Asked if Malaysia would voice its displeasure to the republic, he said this had already been done many times.

On the suggestion by Umno Youth that Malaysia should consider boosting its presence by carrying out its own construction work, Dr Mahathir said to do this, Malaysians had to land on the island.

"And then you will provoke another fight because Singapore has already occupied the island."

The only thing left, he said, was to let the matter be resolved by the ICJ.

A Bernama report from Kuantan quotes Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob as saying that the party wants Singapore to stop all construction work on Pulau Batu Putih until the question of sovereignty over the island has been decided by the ICJ.

Khalil, who is also Information Minister, said any activity carried out by Singapore on the island could be considered a provocation as the Malaysian Government and Umno had been patiently protesting against such actions through diplomatic channels.

"Both sides have agreed to refer the matter for arbitration, so we should cease all activities.

"We urge Singapore to stop immediately all activities on the island until the matter has been decided by the international court," he said after attending a Hari Raya gathering with staff of the Information Ministry, heads of department and community leaders.

Khalil said Umno might think of other measures to take.

What was needed was to gather evidence, including photographs of the place before and now, to show that Singapore had been conducting activities on the island, he said.

"This is from my point of interpretation, that Singapore is breaching the ethics and norms for matters being referred for arbitration," he said.

Meanwhile, Umno Youth will submit a protest note to the Singapore High Commission tomorrow.

Its international bureau chairman Dr Shamsul Anwar Sulaiman said the movement took a serious view of the matter as the island was still under dispute.

"Singapore should not be carrying out such work as it has no rights over the island.

"Its action shows that it is not respecting its neighbouring countries," he added.