

08/09/2002

MB: Singapore's stand on water issue a stumbling block to ties

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MUAR, Sat. - The unwillingness of Singapore to compromise in settling the water pricing dispute with Malaysia has posed a stumbling block to efforts in solving the outstanding bilateral issues between the two countries.

Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman said the republic had constantly insisted on its rights under the existing water agreement without giving much consideration to its neighbourly relations with Malaysia.

"Where in the world can you buy untreated water at three sen per 1,000 gallons (as stipulated in the existing agreements)?"

"This is much too low and Johor has been losing money for years in supplying water to the republic.

"It seems that Singapore is not facing reality on this issue."

Ghani, nonetheless, said it was insignificant whether Singapore would allow the water agreements to lapse as Johor is ready with contingency plans.

The plans include the completion of the Semangar water treatment plant in Kota Tinggi next year which will end Johor's dependency on treated water supply from Singapore.

The RM648 million Semangar plant will produce 160 million gallons of treated water per day.

Under the two existing water agreements with Singapore, Johor is buying 37 million gallons of treated water from Singapore per day at 50 sen per 1,000 gallons.

In return, the State sells 350 million gallons of raw water per day to the republic at three sen per 1,000 gallons.

Ghani also concurred with the proposal by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that there should be a time frame in resolving the dispute over the price of water supplied to Singapore.

He said the Johor Government would abide by whatever decision made by the Federal Government on the water issue.

"I have to agree with Dr Mahathir that this matter should not be allowed to drag on indefinitely."

Ghani said this after launching the "Merdeka Month" celebrations at Sekolah Kebangsaan Bukit Gambir, about 30km from here.

On Singapore's reclamation project along the Johor and Tebrau straits, Ghani said the State Government had drawn "strategic measures" to counter the environmental threat along the Johor coastline resulting from the project.

However, he declined to elaborate on the measures.

"We have to take our own measures because Singapore does not seem to show any concern that the project is affecting its neighbour.

"We will also closely monitor the progress of the project," he said.

The reclamation project has so far narrowed the Johor Strait to as close as 700 metres at some points along the coastline of Tanjung Pengelih.

It was learnt that the project will possibly close the shipping passage between the republic's Pulau Tekong and Pulau Ubin, effectively jeopardising the operations at the Johor Port in Pasir Gudang.