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Malaysia still willing to pump millions of gallons of scarce water to

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A FELLOW journalist asked me if he should take mineral water to Singapore when covering the second round of bilateral talks on the outstanding issues affecting Malaysia and Singapore.

Before I could say anything, he decided to take enough supply for the three days that he would be in the republic for the talks. "I am not going to touch Newater," he said, referring to Singapore's water recycled from sinks and toilets.

The contentious issue of water, a thorn in the side of Malaysia's bilateral relations with Singapore, is expected to dominate when the two neighbours meet in the republic for a second round of talks over two days beginning today.

The meeting is the second at ministerial level. The first round, in Putrajaya in early July, did not make much headway. Talks held at senior officers' level three years ago also failed to reach any conclusive agreement.

Both parties, however, have agreed that meetings to resolve bilateral issues should deal with all outstanding issues in one package, consistent with the understanding reached between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Singapore counterpart, Goh Chok Tong, on the sidelines of the Asean Summit in Hanoi in December 1998.

The faster they are resolved, the better it would be for the neighbours.

As it is, the water issue touches the nerve of people on both sides of the Causeway.

A recent survey by Singapore's Straits Times, although not necessarily representative of the views of the island republic's four million population, indicated that Singaporeans had had enough of the bickering over water and "would rather drink recycled water than depend on Malaysia" for their daily needs.

Singapore, however, is still relying on Malaysia for half of its daily water needs.

Its recent turn to desalination and recycling waste water into something drinkable has boosted its Government's confidence, prompting the republic to declare it would allow the first of its two water agreements with Malaysia to lapse in 2011. The other is to expire in 2061. The agreements were signed in 1961 and 1962, respectively.

Under the two agreements, Malaysia supplies 350 million gallons of raw water a day to Singapore, or half its present daily water consumption, at a cost of three sen per 1,000 gallons.

When the first agreement ends in 2011 the amount would be reduced to 250 million gallons per day until the second agreement runs out in 2061.

Despite a series of talks, both parties have failed to reach an agreement on the pricing structure.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, who led the Malaysian delegation in the first round of talks, said Malaysia had proposed that Singapore pay 60 sen for 1,000 gallons from now until 2007. From 2007 to 2011, the price is to be fixed at RM3.

Syed Hamid said after 2011, Malaysia wants a price structure using a new formula. This was rejected by Singapore.

Singapore, however, proposed to pay 45 sen per 1,000 gallons from now until 2011, and 60 sen per 1,000 gallons until 2061.

That water is becoming scarce and turning into an extremely valuable

commodity is surely appreciated by Singapore.

Having a ready supply of water is indeed a blessing as residents in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur would readily agree. They remember how difficult it was in 1998 when their taps ran dry, and the morning shower which was taken for granted became a luxury.

The importance of water can never be in dispute and bearing this in mind, both parties should come to an amicable settlement.

After all, Malaysia has already expressed its willingness to supply water, either raw or treated, for another 100 years at a negotiated price.

Other items on agenda are:

- * The transfer of Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) station from Tanjung Pagar to Woodlands and the status of the KTM land in Singapore;

- * The relocation of the Malaysian Customs, Immigration and Quarantine complex which is currently in Tanjung Pagar;

- * Central Provident Fund (CPF) withdrawals by Peninsular Malaysians who are no longer working in Singapore; and,

- * The use of Malaysian airspace by low-flying Singapore air force jets.

Syed Hamid will again head the Malaysian delegation at the meeting, while his Singapore counterpart S. Jayakumar will lead the Singapore delegation.