

16 MAY 2002

Singapore-Malaysia

SINGAPORE, MALAYSIA WORKING ON DATE TO MEET AGAIN ON PACKAGE

SINGAPORE, May 16 (Bernama) -- Singapore and Malaysia are expected to soon settle on a date to resume negotiations over the package of outstanding issues that has stalled and weighed down ties over the past three years, said the republic's Foreign Minister S.Jayakumar today.

Updating Parliament on the status of the package during the debate on his ministry's budget, Jayakumar said that his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, had suggested alternatives to Singapore's proposed dates and officials were working on a convenient date.

Central to the package is renewed water supply to Singapore which has indicated that it must rely less on water from Malaysia to remove a thorn in their relationship.

Jayakumar also said that Singapore had replied yesterday to a note from Malaysia that its land reclamation works in Pulau Tekong caused transboundary environmental impact on Malaysia's territorial waters and narrowed the waterway in Kuala Johor.

He said that the allegations were unsubstantiated and lacked particulars.

"We therefore reminded the (Malaysian) high commissioner to ask his government to send us a note itemising the concerns in detail for us to study," he said.

Jayakumar said that the outstanding package and the land reclamation issues had become the bell-wethers for the course of the bilateral relationship.

He said that it was natural to conclude that the ties were at a low point based on the two issues and other matters that had hogged the headlines in recent months but he considered the choppy patch normal between immediate neighbours.

"Singapore and Malaysia share a complex, an interlinked relationship, and keeping it on an even keel is never an easy task. Therefore both sides should view Singapore-Malaysia relations not in an emotional sense, bogged down by historical baggage but from a pragmatic and longer term perspective rather than try to seek short-term gains through one upmanship," he said.

During the debate, several Members of Parliament spoke on the need to discard the historical baggage from the separation of the two countries in the 60s to resolve the package.

They also spoke strongly against reported remarks by Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that like in skinning a cat, there were many ways to skin Singapore in the economic competition between the two countries.

One MP said that Singapore was no pussy cat but a lion, a second called it a Freudian slip by Dr Mahathir that was unhelpful to bilateral ties. Another said that if the remark was made by Singapore, it would have created a ruckus outside the Singapore mission in Kuala Lumpur.

There were also suggestions that the spate of media reports against Singapore across the Causeway was a case of Malaysia again making Singapore the bogeyman ahead of a general election.

Jayakumar said that Singaporeans should take the remarks in their stride as Singapore had been called names before like a little red dot, a pimple that would not burst or that its people were accused of being thick-skinned.

Singaporeans instead should note the underlying message of Dr

Mahathir's metaphor and gear up for the seriousness of the competition.

Jayakumar also noted that despite the roller-coaster ties, the two countries had kept open the communication channel and exchanged visits by ministers and officials from both sides.

Member of Parliament Zainul Abidin Rasheed disagreed with Dr Mahathir's statement that Malays here did not have a place and suggested that the Malaysian leader visit Singapore to have a better understanding of their position.

-- BERNAMA

TCL RM