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S'pore-Talks

S'PORE MEDIA BLAME M'SIA FOR 'SNAG' IN BILATERAL TALKS

By Salbiah Said

SINGAPORE, Sept 5 (Bernama) -- Was the Malaysian delegation led by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar to blame for causing a "snag" in the two-day bilateral talks which ended here on Tuesday?

The Singapore media certainly think so.

Right from the start on Monday, the Singapore media have been pointing a finger at the Malaysian team for the delays.

The Straits Times in its front page report Tuesday said that "the fundamental rift was clear at the end of two days of stop-and-start talks, which saw the schedule being thrown out the window as meetings were delayed repeatedly, following last-minute requests by the Malaysians."

In another report headlined "Meals That Went Untasted" yesterday, the Straits Times said that "a spread of nasi padang dishes from the well-known Zion Road stall was prepared for the dozen or so guests from across the Causeway after Singapore officials got wind that the stall was a favourite of the Malaysian minister."

But Syed Hamid and his team, said the report, "never did taste these delights on Monday, leaving quickly before lunchtime for the Malaysian High Commission in nearby Jervois Road after hearing Singapore's proposal on the package of bilateral issues."

On Tuesday, a midday meal was also laid for the visitors at the Singapore Foreign Ministry in Tanglin, "but after wrapping up the day's affairs with his Singapore counterparts, Syed Hamid and his group left for Apollo Banana Leaf Restaurant, the Indian fish-head curry haunt in Race Course Road that is apparently also one of his top Singapore picks."

Malaysian officials denied delaying the meeting.

Malaysian daily, The Star today quoted a Malaysian official as saying that "the reason why we did not have the lunch on the first day was because Singapore gave their comments and made quite a lengthy presentation.

"There were a lot of items that we needed to study and discuss to prepare our response.

"Since we do not have the facilities at the (Singapore) Foreign Affairs Ministry, we decided to go back to our mission. We also needed to amend our proposal to be submitted to them," said an official.

The official said that the Malaysian delegation had their own meeting until 7pm on the first day and when they went to see the Singaporeans, the hosts told them they wanted a 30-minute break but were not able to come back to the negotiation table that night.

Syed Hamid, at a media conference for Malaysian reporters at the end of the first day of talks, did say that his team needed time to respond to Singapore's presentation, which he noted, was a detailed one.

After a separate meeting with his own group until 7pm, the minister had said that their Singapore hosts, after requesting for a half-hour break, did not show up at the negotiation table, and by 9pm, the Malaysian team decided to adjourn for a late dinner.

The second day, according to Malaysian officials, Singapore told the Malaysian delegation that they were not able to meet until 11am although it was supposed to start at 9am.

The Malaysians were made to understand that Singapore Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar had gone to see Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, thus the delay. It was only after 11am that both sides were able to meet when Singapore gave their response to Malaysia's proposals.

The hosts were also informed that the minister wanted to have lunch at Apolo Banana Leaf Restaurant.

"There was no intention to offend our hosts. It is not factually correct to put the blame on Malaysia. The reason was genuine," an official was quoted as saying.

Jayakumar, when asked by the local media on the delay, said: "Well, we are good hosts. They wanted time to consider their response to my statement. And we are prepared to give them as much time as they wanted."

Most of the mainstream newspapers in Malaysia believe that Malaysia came out out of the talks with Singapore over the package of unresolved issues in a slightly better position.

By agreeing to discuss the upward review of the price of raw water being sold under two current agreements, Singapore had edged closer to the stand taken by Kuala Lumpur on this crucial issue, the Malaysian dailies said.

The Singapore dailies were less upbeat than their Malaysian counterparts, describing the talks as reaching a deadlock. The Straits Times yesterday said that the talks hit a snag after Malaysia switched tack on the agreement.

The radical shift, it said, came when Syed Hamid declared that "if we do not move on water, then we cannot move on other things."

Syed Hamid told the Malaysian media on the first day and reiterated Malaysia's stand the following day that Malaysia wanted the water price review as well as rail and land-related issues to be dealt with individually and not part of the package.

In fact, the Straits Times, in an article "KL-S'pore talks: Back To Square One?" today said that "Malaysia wanted to take the negotiations not just a few steps back, but all the way to the bottom of the slope. Not just back to square one, but square zero, as it were."

Malaysia, it said, "had backtracked even beyond the landmark September 2001 agreement between Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that laid out a skeletal outline of how the thorny issues should be settled."

Meanwhile, The Star today reported that both Malaysian and Singapore officials were preparing to convene a meeting at their level soon, adding that Malaysia, it was learnt, wanted to hold the meeting in two or three weeks as Kuala Lumpur felt that the water issue must be addressed urgently to enable the other outstanding issues in the bilateral package to be resolved.

On Tuesday, Syed Hamid said that the third ministerial talks will be held in Kuala Lumpur after officials from both sides sit down and discuss the fresh proposals submitted by Kuala Lumpur on the water review.

The meeting would involve senior officers from the Treasury, representatives from the Johor Government and Wisma Putra. It is the first time Singapore has consented to Malaysia's request to discuss the water issue, although it was adamant that water be considered a part of the outstanding package of issues.

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