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RECLAMATION HAS NOT ENCROACHED INTO M'SIAN WATERS, SAYS GHANI

JOHOR BAHRU, March 18 (Bernama) -- There is no information to show that Singapore's reclamation works at its waters in Tuas in the west of Johor have encroached into Malaysian territory, Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman said today.

However, there was information which showed that the reclamation in Tuas was getting too close to the Malaysian side at just 300m from the maritime border, while works at Tanjung Pengelih in east Johor were 700m from the Pularek jetty, he said.

"The current flows in the area have increased to 5 knots (normal flow was between 2.5 and 3 knots) following the reclamation which has made the Johor Straits narrower," he told reporters at the Johor State Assembly here.

When asked to elaborate on the reclamation issue raised at the State Assembly sitting, Abdul Ghani said the shipping lane had become narrower and shallower forcing ships to be guided into the Pasir Gudang Port via south of Pulau Tekong and Pulau Ubin, which are owned by Singapore.

"As a result, costs for ships to call at the Pasir Gudang Port will increase," he said.

According to Abdul Ghani, Singapore planned to increase its present size of 660 sq km by 15 percent through land reclamation.

Abdul Ghani said that after the reclamation at Pulau Tekong and Pulau Ubin, it was not impossible for Singapore to link these islands to Singapore island by bridges.

Such a development would raise concerns on the movement of ships into and out of Pasir Gudang, he said.

Earlier, during question time in the House, he said the question of changes to the Malaysia-Singapore border did not arise because it had been fixed under a maritime border agreement signed by the two countries on Aug 7, 1995.

The agreement, signed by the foreign ministers of both countries, has superseded a border agreement signed on Aug 8, 1927 by the two countries.

"The latest agreement was signed based on survey works done by the naval hydrography divisions of both countries," Abdul Ghani said when replying to Malik Ibrahim (BN-Pulai Sebatang) who had asked about the measures taken to safeguard the country's borders as the reclamation might alter boundaries.

"What has become an issue now is that Singapore's reclamation works are expected to affect the deep water channel and the marine ecology and could cause coastal erosion in Johor," he said.

Abdul Ghani said the federal government had set up a team to collect facts and technical information on the effects of the reclamation project on Malaysian waters.

He said monitoring done by the state government showed that Singapore's reclamation works in Pulau Tekong and Pulau Ubin in east Johor and Tuas in west Johor were within Singapore territory.

Responding to several assemblymen's allegation on the state government's complacency in handling the reclamation issue, Abdul Ghani said dealings with Singapore were on a government-to-government basis.

Baharom Abdul Ghani (BN-Tanjung Kupang), in his supplementary question, said if the government had reacted faster to the issue, Malaysia's views could have been forwarded to the republic earlier.

In his reply, Abdul Ghani said although the issue had become public knowledge, Singapore should officially explain its plans to Malaysia in the spirit of neighbourliness and diplomacy.

"I myself have been reminded by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that dealings with Singapore are between the federal government and the government in the republic, and not between the Johor state government and Singapore government," he said.

-- BERNAMA

MNY MAI YBY