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Singapore-Malaysia

DON'T HARP ON OLD RECORD OF BILATERAL ISSUES, GOH TELLS MALAYSIA

By: Tham Choy Lin

SINGAPORE, March 15 (Bernama) -- Amid renewed strain in bilateral ties, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has described managing relations with Malaysia as a challenge and said the two will benefit immensely by working closely to tackle common challenges instead of "playing the old record of bilateral issues."

"Recently, there has been a barrage of criticisms against Singapore, both in the Malaysian media and in the Malaysian Parliament. In many instances, the facts were wrong, omitted or twisted," he told a grassroots gathering tonight.

Goh said he was still trying to fathom the media barrage, adding that Singapore too had its sensitivities but it would not engage in a battle of words as it would be "an unproductive, endless exercise".

Taking issue with a Malaysian journalist who he said had belittled Singapore as an "irritating pimple that refuses to burst", Goh said: "I suppose Singapore's refusal to play younger brother irritates him."

He said the remark harked back to former Indonesian president Habibie's dismissive description of Singapore as "a little red dot".

"Let us quietly resolve to show them this 'pimple' is actually a beauty spot and this 'red dot', a treasured ruby," he said.

Goh's diatribe came a day after his deputy Lee Hsien Loong ended a four-day visit to Malaysia during which he met Malaysian leaders, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and the issue of Singapore's land reclamation in the Straits of Johor was discussed.

Over the past two weeks, the land reclamation matter has added to a list of spats between the two countries with Malaysia voicing fears that Singapore's activities would narrow the waterway that separates them and affect shipping, ecology and the livelihood of fishermen in the area.

Singapore has repeatedly said the reclamation was done within its rights and according to international law.

During his visit, Lee said that Singapore was prepared to consider Malaysia's views and had asked Kuala Lumpur to send a note on its concerns.

Singapore media have reported Lee as saying that both sides have less room to manoeuvre now because the land reclamation issue had been played up by the Malaysian media.

"We do not seek a confrontation and it is a pity it has been blown up in the Malaysian newspapers," he was quoted as saying.

As a result, even if Singapore made adjustments, it would face questions from its own people why it was backing down, Lee said.

Apart from the land reclamation issue, the two countries still have to resolve an agreed package of outstanding issues that includes a new water supply agreement for Singapore and the redevelopment of Malaysian-owned railway land here.

The package was reached between Goh and Dr Mahathir in December 1998 but negotiations have stalled over the contentious price of water for the new agreement.

The Singapore deputy premier said Dr Mahathir had sent a letter to Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew on new proposals and a fresh formula for the water pricing and Singapore was studying them.

The senior Lee had visited Kuala Lumpur twice to discuss the package with Dr Mahathir.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was working on a new settlement package and

it respected Singapore's position not to negotiate it through the press.

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