

29/12/2002

Malaysian media gives Pulau Batu Puteh issue close scrutiny

Balan Moses

A CORAL reef that is smaller than a football field is at the eye of a diplomatic storm threatening to jeopardise the already uneasy relations between Malaysia and Singapore.

Good neighbourliness seems to have been thrown out the window with officials on both sides of the Causeway barely maintaining civility in negotiations over the fate of Pulau Batu Puteh, or Pedra Branca for the republic.

The Malaysian media, which has been following the issue closely for some time, gave the issue close scrutiny last week after an episode involving the media which left a bad taste in the mouth for local newsmen.

A group of reporters, who had chartered a boat to survey the island from a respectable distance, were ordered off by a Singapore marine police vessel.

For the record, Singapore is maintaining that the island, located more than 60km from its coast but only 12.8km from Malaysia, belongs to it despite historical records that clearly prove Malaysia's ownership of the island.

The republic has also been constructing several structures on the reef since the mid-1980s despite the dispute over ownership and in contravention of international convention in such matters. The Bahasa Malaysia media, and indeed all other local media, went to town with the issue which was undeniably the story of the week.

Berita Harian, in an editorial yesterday, said Singapore was emulating the example of Israel (which advises the island on various issues) in claiming territory that did not belong to it. In a hard-hitting piece of advice to Singapore, the newspaper said the republic had misunderstood responsibility for a lighthouse to mean ownership over the coral reef.

Seething over remarks by some quarters in Singapore that the Malaysian media had gone overboard on the matter, the newspaper said the republic's claim over the island gave currency to the fact that its ways were unusual, often running contrary to accepted norms of international behaviour.

Berita Harian said this was usually manifested in finger-pointing by the Singaporeans in any contentious situation of which there had been several lately between the neighbours.

The newspaper pointed to the historical proof of Malaysia's sovereignty over Pulau Batu Puteh which was supported by the British colonial Government's irrefutable acknowledgement of the Sultan of Johor's hereditary claim over the island.

This, it said, was clear in the documents that bore the seal of the British East India Company, the last of which was that signed in 1927 which reaffirmed Johor's ownership.

In a scathing rebuke, it said Singapore could then stake a claim to Pulau Pisang near Pontian if the maintenance of lighthouses was the yardstick used to claim ownership of territory (Singapore maintains the lighthouse on the island).

It also raised the issue of Singapore's feet-dragging over the signing of a document that would formalise the decision to take the matter to the International Court of Justice.

Was such vacillation, Berita Harian asked, a ploy to delay arbitration over the issue? The newspaper probably voiced the concern of Malaysians

when it also asked if this could be aimed at weakening Malaysia's case as the ICJ would decide largely on the issue of effectiveness (effective administration) as it did in the case of Pulau Sipadan and Pulau Ligitan.

Utusan Malaysia yesterday quoted Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar as saying that Singapore's sincerity in the matter was questionable as it had yet to sign the document agreeing to take the ownership dispute to the ICJ.

He pointed to the fact that Malaysia had offered several dates this year for the signing of the agreement but none had been acceptable to Singapore. The newspaper said the matter had come to a head after its expose last Sunday of Singapore's renewed efforts at constructing new structures on the island.

It also mentioned public concern in Malaysia over Singapore's efforts to warn Malaysian naval and police vessels entering waters off Pulau Batu Puteh.

On Thursday, Utusan Malaysia quoted Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as saying that Malaysia would not send warships into waters off the disputed island as this could lead to war with Singapore.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia wanted to avoid a confrontation with Singapore although they had deployed similar vessels off the island.

Underlining the fact that Malaysia wanted a peaceful resolution to the dispute, he had said that Malaysia's reticence in the matter did not mean it was giving in to Singapore but indicated that it did not want to create a situation that could lead to war.

The Chinese newspapers also gave wide coverage to the issue with the Sin Chew Daily opining that Malaysia-Singapore relations were set to worsen over the Pulau Batu Puteh issue.

It felt that Singapore should not go ahead with the construction work on the island at this juncture. It should allow for a peaceful settlement of the issue by the ICJ instead of engaging in actions that could be read as hostile.

It believed that both nations should do whatever necessary to expedite the hearing of the case by the ICJ.