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Singapore vessels chase away Marine Police boat from disputed island

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KOTA TINGGI, Tues. - A Singapore naval vessel chased a Marine Police boat, with journalists on board, for about four nautical miles from Pulau Batu Putih today.

The Malaysian police boat PA41, from the Marine Police Southern Region headquarters based in Tanjung Puteri, Johor Baru, was on a routine observation patrol of the island when the incident happened.

The boat was approaching the island about 1.30pm when a Singapore Navy patrol vessel turned up and made a rapid approach towards it. It was joined by a Singapore coast guard vessel, which had been docked at the jetty on the island.

A sailor on the coast guard vessel, using a loud-hailer, repeatedly warned the Malaysian boat to leave the area.

"This is Singapore waters, please leave immediately," he boomed.

The captain of PA41 manoeuvred the vessel away from the island and the Singapore naval ship and coast guard vessel "escorted" the Malaysian boat for a distance, keeping a one-nautical-mile gap between them before turning back towards the island.

Apart from the crew, there were 12 journalists on board the Malaysian police boat.

It is learnt that this was not the first time Malaysian Marine Police boats had been told to stay away from the island by their Singaporean counterparts.

Malaysian fishermen have also been frequently chased away from the increased patrols by Singapore coast guard area, which used to be their fishing ground until the republic in 1989 indicated its intention to stake its claim on the rocky outcrop.

It is learnt that the Singapore Coast Guard has increased patrols in the area since the sovereignty of the island, located less than 15 nautical miles from Penggerang, became a major issue between the two countries.

The move by the republic to construct new structures in addition to the lighthouse on the island recently sparked protests from Malaysia, as the territorial dispute has yet to be heard by the International Court of Justice.

The agreement to settle the dispute at the ICJ was reached at a meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong in Langkawi in September last year.