

23/01/2002

Settle water issue quickly

IT takes two to tango. Singapore, however, doesn't seem to want to dance to the conciliatory tune set at a landmark meeting in September between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the republic's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Then, to the relief of both sides, an agreement in principle on several long-running issues between Malaysia and Singapore appeared to have been wrapped up. Only the nitty-gritty was left to be worked out.

On the face of it, Singapore's desire to bundle those issues into a single negotiating "package" reflected an earnestness to get them settled. Once a political deal had been reached at the highest level, officials would start work on the fine print of a comprehensive agreement whose general terms and aims had already been set. But Lee jumped the gun by disclosing some important details of a new water accord following the September meeting.

Those details continue to needle the bilateral relationship. Singapore does not appear to want to give ground before the price of water is fixed to its satisfaction. As for Malaysia, it wants the issue to be settled quickly because water is being sold to Singapore at an indefensibly low price. Singapore buys raw water piped from Johor at three sen per thousand gallons, and sells back treated water to us at 50 sen. In effect, it is getting the water for free - and making a profit on top of it.

Since Singapore has turned the water issue into a pivot for the resolution of the other outstanding issues, talks have come to a near standstill. This is unreasonable. Although the idea of "linkage" is a bona-fide negotiating tactic, holding the agenda hostage to a single dispute risks souring relations. The two sides should push ahead with the rest of the agenda, including the development of railway land owned by KTM Bhd and the status of the Malaysian Customs, Immigration and Quarantine facility at the KTMB station in Tanjong Pagar.

Nevertheless, water remains the central sticking point. Surely Singapore must concede that a price agreement made in 1960 - three years prior to joining Malaysia and five years before it left - has been outstripped by present-day sovereign realities. Although Malaysia believes in the spirit of give-and-take, the other side must reciprocate. Singapore must understand that Malaysia has to strike a fair bargain in what is at root a commercial transaction over an essential commodity. The sooner this matter is settled, the better it will be for a beneficial relationship.

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