

'Girlfriend' remark demeans water talks, says ex-envoy

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SINGAPORE: The country's former high commissioner to Malaysia, K. Kesavapany, is cross that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad "trivialised" letters made public here over the water deal.

In a letter to the *Straits Times* on Saturday, Kesavapany criticised Mahathir for comparing the letters he exchanged with Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew with letters "sent to a girlfriend".

"I did not get the impression that some Barbara Cartland kind of romance was going on," he said. "On the contrary, serious work was in progress to resolve long-standing and new problems which were bedevilling bilateral relations."

Kesavapany, however, did not mention if it was appropriate for the confidential letters to be published.

In an interview with the newspaper on Sunday, Kesavapany, 67, who now heads the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, said: "Since I was there on the spot when the letters were exchanged, I had a responsibility to set the record straight."

Last Thursday, Mahathir criticised Singapore for releasing the letters, saying it showed a lack of good faith.

To show his displeasure, he used an analogy: "You write a letter to your girlfriend. And your girlfriend circulates it to all her boyfriends. I don't think I'll get involved with that girl."

Kesavapany said that he was surprised by Mahathir's remarks because during his

term in Kuala Lumpur from 1997 to last year, bilateral relations had been conducted with decorum and seriousness.

He said: "To say that it was just like letters being 'sent to a girlfriend' is to demean the negotiating process. It was sad to see a Malaysian leader being cavalier about the commitments he had given in a letter to Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew."

In his letter, he said that as far as Singapore was concerned, the letters contained serious statements of positions.

"It was on this basis that various concessions were made to move the negotiations forward," he said.

He claimed that Malaysia's tendency to trivialise the agreements reached and commitments made had been the bane of Malaysia-Singapore ties.

"What is needed is the political will to fix the negotiating positions and, after a cooling-off period, to get back to the negotiating table," he said. "Alternatively, in the case of water, both sides could resort to arbitration."