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S'pore-Bilateral

COOPERATION REMAINS THE WATCHWORD

By: Salbiah Said

SINGAPORE, Feb 4 (Bernama) -- Under all the rhetoric on the long-standing disputes between Malaysia and Singapore lies the desire of both nations to work together and settle their differences amicably.

"These (disputes) will go on forever. Water, Pedra Branca...the media will latch on to it...but don't get worked up. Real life goes on. Under all the rhetoric, the foundation is quite solid," says Karim Raslan, the Malaysian-based lawyer and columnist.

Two words make up Karim's drawling encouragement to Singaporeans and Malaysians caught in the crossfire of the political war of words.

"Relax Brother."

"We've got to relax, we've got to avoid being manipulated by the media and by our leaders. We've got to be more sceptical of them," Karim adds.

Relations between Malaysia and Singapore are marked by several 'irritants', chief among them are the water price revision issue and the sovereignty of Pulau Batu Puteh.

The war of words escalated further after Singapore made public two years of correspondence between Malaysian and Singapore leaders in their water dealings, drawing strong protests from its northern neighbour.

Despite the bickerings, both sides have expressed their willingness to cooperate, as reflected in their statements.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said that the best thing to do now is to stop unnecessary talk and not to engage in finger-pointing.

He said that both sides could have strong differences but this should not translate into unwarranted action, such as the revelation by Singapore of what were supposed to be confidential documents pertaining to water price negotiation between the two countries.

"We can have strong differences but I think it is not right when you cannot agree on a negotiation, then you start to publish letters," he said after appearing on RTM's morning talkshow programme last Friday.

On Jan 25, Singapore Foreign Affairs Minister S. Jayakumar told Parliament that "the release was necessary to set the record straight and let people judge for themselves the allegations being made by the Malaysians."

But even Jayakumar's strongly worded speech in Parliament had some element of hope. "It is Singapore's desire to have good, not strained, relations with Malaysia. There is much that both countries can gain by working together."

"Our common interests far exceed our bilateral differences," said Jayakumar in his speech, which among others stressed that the water dispute was not about money but about Singapore's sovereignty as, he pointed out, the water agreements were guaranteed by the Separation Agreement.

Malaysians have expressed their anger at Singapore for publicising letters, including those exchanged between Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

Dr Mahathir made it clear that he considered the release of correspondence between himself and Lee as lack of good faith.

"I don't feel nice. 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."

But despite his displeasure, the Malaysian premier said that he had no

quarrel with Singaporeans despite the current state of bilateral relations and welcomed them as tourists, investors and property buyers.

"We regard the people of Singapore as our neighbours, our friends, and even our brothers and sisters, because a lot of them are actually Malaysians. We have no quarrel with the people of Singapore," said Dr Mahathir.

Both Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, maintained that good relations still existed between the two neighbours.

"Our heads can sometimes knock together when we move around to go for the ball. I've been good friends with their leaders over the years," said Abdullah, describing Malaysia-Singapore ties as being sometimes like a soccer game.

His Singapore counterpart called on Singaporeans not to be pessimistic about relations with Malaysia despite the poor prospects of reaching a deal on the future supply of water.

Lee said that ties may have hit a "rough patch" but this will pass. Apart from water, there were other aspects of bilateral ties that could be worked on at the business-to-business and people-to-people levels, he said upon returning from Switzerland and France last week.

Singapore's former high commissioner to Malaysia, K. Kesavapany expressed optimism yesterday that the door for the resumption of negotiations was still open.

"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."

"Alternatively, in the case of water, both sides could resort to arbitration," he said. He is hopeful that everything will turn out right.

"I personally feel that enough goodwill still exists to bring matters to a positive conclusion," said Kesavapany, 67, who now heads the Institute of South East Asian Studies.

Singapore's Trade and Industry Minister BG George Yeo Yong Boon said he is confident that relations between the two countries should improve this year, given the close economic ties.

He pointed especially to Singapore's large investments in Malaysia, half in Johor, as well as the fact that more than half of Malaysia's visitors are Singaporeans or foreigners going there from Singapore.

"Our futures are so intertwined" and it's important that relations be put back on a normal footing "so that the economic links continue to flourish", he said.

Both Malaysian and Singapore leaders have stressed the importance of cooperation, especially after Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia on Aug 9, 1965. Indeed, bilateral cooperation remains the watchword.

To quote an editorial in the Straits Times on Aug 10, 1965, headed: 'These Links Must Stay', it stressed the need to preserve economic links and discourage trade barriers.

"Political discords are one thing, economic imperatives another...No political separation can conceal the intrinsic oneness of Malaya and Singapore...Separations in the past have been artificial; so does this one...argue with geographical and economic realities."

And the paper concluded, "With the blurring of political conflict removed, economic imperatives should be more clearly seen, and more rigorously defended.

Its sister publication, the Malay Mail, highlighted the pledge by both governments to cooperate in economic matters and defence. "Cooperation must remain the watchword in both capitals."

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