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Agreement-ICJ

M'SIA, S'PORE INK PACT TO REFER PULAU BATU PUTEH DISPUTE TO ICJ

PUTRAJAYA, Feb 6 (Bernama) -- Malaysia and Singapore today put into motion legal procedures to end their territorial dispute over Pulau Batu Puteh by signing a special agreement to refer the matter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague.

The agreement also calls for the ICJ to determine the ownership of two adjacent rocky outcrops -- Middle Rocks and South Ledge.

The pact was inked by Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and his Singaporean counterpart, S. Jayakumar, at Wisma Putra, here in the presence of officials from both sides.

Malaysia has always maintained that Pulau Batu Puteh, sited 7.7 nautical miles from Tanjung Penyusop in Johor and 25 nautical miles from Singapore's east coast, is within its (Malaysian) territory.

However, Singapore laid claim to the island around 1979, and both countries subsequently agreed to settle their dispute through the ICJ.

Although it is just a speck on the map, Pulau Batu Puteh is significant for several reasons, including its strategic position at the mouth of an important maritime lane and impact on the delimitation of territorial sea boundaries.

"Of course it is important...because it is in our territory. We don't take into consideration whether there are sources of oil. Our country is our country...we don't allow people to take any part of our country," said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad late last year on how important the island is to Malaysia.

The territorial dispute came to the fore following Malaysia's success in gaining sovereignty over the Sipadan and Ligitan islands off Sabah when the ICJ ruled on Dec 17, 2002 that Malaysia, and not Indonesia, is the owner of the palm-fringed islands.

The special agreement is important in that it spells out the dispute and provides a time-frame for the various legal processes such as submission of written pleadings.

In 1993, Singapore also put in claims for Middle Rock and South Ledge during discussions on the text of the agreement.

Malaysia and Singapore agreed on the text of the said agreement in 1998 but somehow could not concur on when it should be signed despite several dates being traded across the Causeway.

Singapore has at one point suggested that it be inked at the Asean-European Union Foreign Ministers meeting in Brussels at the end of last month but this was ruled out by Malaysia.

Finally, Syed Hamid announced on Jan 9 that the special agreement would be signed today, a date that was proposed by Malaysia.

The minister has previously said that he expected the matter to be resolved in three years.

The Pulau Batu Puteh dispute is one of the issues that has shadowed relations between the two Asean neighbours which went separate ways in 1965.

Things came to a boil when a boat carrying a group of Malaysian journalists was chased away by Singapore marine police on Dec 24, last year while attempting to have a closer look at what Singapore was doing on Pulau Batu Puteh.

Malaysia also took offence at Singapore's accusations that its navy and police boats have repeatedly intruded into the waters surrounding the

disputed island.

Apart from operating the Horsburgh Lighthouse, Singapore has built radar installations and a helipad there.

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