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'GIRLFRIEND' REMARK 'DEMEANS' WATER TALKS, SAYS FORMER DIPLOMAT

SINGAPORE, Feb 3 (Bernama) -- Former high commissioner to Malaysia, K. Kesavapany has criticised Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for comparing the letters Dr Mahathir exchanged with Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew over the water issue with letters 'sent to a girlfriend.'

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

In an interview with the newspaper yesterday, Kesavapany, 67, who now heads the Institute of South-East 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, Dr 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."

In yesterday's interview, Kesavapany said that he was surprised by Dr 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 now, that it was just like letters being 'sent to a girlfriend' is to demean the whole negotiating process. It was sad to see a Malaysian leader being cavalier about the commitments he had given in a written letter to Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew."

In his Forum page 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.

Still, he 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," he said.

Meanwhile, Trade and Industry Minister B.G.George Yeo Yong Boon is confident that relations between the two countries should improve this year, given the close economic ties, the Straits Times reported.

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 at a Chinese New Year gathering at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

B.G.Yeo favoured the release of the letters exchanged by Singaporean

and Malaysian leaders over the water issue because the move would enable everyone to judge for themselves what had happened.

Minister in the Prime Minister's office, Lim Boon Heng, who said that the release would allow foreigners to draw their own conclusions, also accused the press and politicians of Malaysia of whipping up public sentiment with the way they had been attacking Singapore, while Singapore had, in various responses, been 'fairly neutral' and much less vociferous than Malaysia.

Lim, who is also secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), stressed that Singapore wanted to cooperate with its neighbours but if that was impossible "then as Singaporeans we learn to depend on ourselves as we have done in the past".

-- BERNAMA

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