

16 JUL 2003

S'pore-Ads

KL'S AD BLITZ: S'PORE MEDIA'S RESPONSE

SINGAPORE, July 16 (Bernama) -- "Nothing new" and "puzzling" were some of the words used in Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) initial response to Malaysia's media ad blitz, which entered its fourth day, on the stalled water talks.

Last Monday, a MFA spokesman, in response to media queries, described the timing of the full-page advertisements -- placed in major local dailies since Sunday, and also in the Asian Wall Street Journal (AWSJ), as "puzzling".

He described the media blitz as "just a repeat of old stories -- they are right and we are wrong. They are reasonable, we are profiteering."

Kuala Lumpur's ad campaign also gave room for speculation on the general election.

"I believe there is a general election next year in Malaysia. As an observer, I just wonder if this may have something to do with it," Singapore's National Trade Union Congress chief and Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, Lim Boon Heng was quoted as saying yesterday.

"It is always cost-free to the politicians over that side to use Singapore as a bogeyman to enhance their standing nationally. So it may be a repeat of what we have seen over the years," said Lim.

The Straits Times, in its article "Water ads: A surreal swashbuckling" published today, said there is "something profoundly surreal" about the series of Malaysian advertisements on the Singapore-Malaysia water dispute, this week.

"It's not just the fact that an enormous sum of money - close to a million ringgit in the case of AWSJ - will be spent on these ads, or that Dow Jones, a publisher often at odds with the Malaysian government will be laughing all the way to the bank," the paper reported.

It said the Singapore government "took the unusual step, in January, of releasing official negotiation documents which showed the Malaysian side flip-flopping on the issue without good reason, that move placed on the line the credibility of the Malaysian government in international negotiations."

"Indeed with three months to go before Dr Mahathir hands over the premiership to Deputy PM Abdullah Badawi, it's not impossible to suggest that the current outburst is calculated to be a demonstration by the outgoing PM to the incoming PM of how Singapore should be handled, now and in the future," said the Straits Times.

"And that is, stand up to Singapore and pull no punches, however much a nice guy you are," the writer wrote.

The Today newspaper, an English tabloid, in its front-page article yesterday also had a strong approach to the issue, headlined 'Ink Attack'.

In the article, its writers wrote: "Just when it appeared that regional ties were on the mend and the simmering water dispute had been placed on the back burner, Malaysia has taken a huge swipe at Singapore with brazen, in-your-face advertisements on the subject."

According to the newspaper: "The tone was stinging and the timing a little puzzling."

Singapore, it said, had published official letters and notes to back its stand while Malaysia's approach was more direct.

Some analysts, it said, "wondered if the ads were meant to offset the political cost Malaysia's ruling party paid at home after Singapore

released letters showing Malaysian leaders flip-flopping. The opposition, such as PAS, had then accused Malaysia's leadership of whipping up domestic sentiments for political gains."

It quoted some analysts as expecting "the hand of the mercurial Dr Mahathir Mohamad behind the tirade as he prepares to hand over the reins of power in October."

Political observer, Seah Chiang Nee was quoted as saying: "Mahathir is an unpredictable man. Singapore will always be at a disadvantage, because it will not know what he's up to next. We certainly can't follow what he's doing. We have to explain every time he comes up with something."

Meanwhile, the article, 'Ink Attack' drew immediate response from a Malaysian reader, Mardupi Ismail of Kuala Lumpur.

In his letter published by the 'Today' newspaper today, Mardupi said that as a Malaysian, he often wondered why bilateral relations between Malaysia and Singapore were "forever hitting rocky patches."

After all, he said, businessmen from both countries work well together, the police and armed forces on both sides have a cordial and professional working relationship, and hundreds of Malaysians and Singaporeans visit each other's countries to eat, shop and catch up with friends and relatives.

"Yet there is this angst and bitterness on both sides of the Causeway that bodes ill for the future," he said.

Malaysia, he said, is determined to compete with Singapore in attracting foreign investments.

As such, it would be expected to react strongly at every attempt by Singapore to portray itself as the hub of Asean, South-East Asia or the Asia Pacific region in almost any area -- be it finance and banking, transportation, logistics or professional services, said Mardupi.

Adding to this, he said, is Singapore's tendency to portray itself as being several steps ahead of other countries in the region and as the only 'good kid in a bad neighbourhood.'

With these two facts in mind, "one can see why Malaysian sensitivities get rubbed the wrong way. This, in turn, leads to resentment, which, in turn, provokes reaction", he said.

"Of course, all of these are not helped by the fact that the Singapore media, and Singapore-based analysts, reporters and journalists like to write snide (or even negative) articles, reports and commentaries on developments in Malaysia."

"Is that a way of competing with Malaysia or is it meant to put Malaysia down in the eyes of foreign investors? Is there some hidden agenda?" said Mardupi.

Foreign investors looking to expand in Asean, he said, must be watching the unfolding Malaysia-Singapore bilateral relationship with bemusement and some concern.

"If Malaysia and Singapore, arguably, the two most advanced countries in Asean, cannot get their act together, what hope is there for the rest of Asean?"

"I would venture to say the changing of the guard from Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Mr Abdullah Badawi will not change things in any substantive way."

"If anything, the competition from Malaysia is going to get more intense."

The way the water dispute is being handled, he said, is symptomatic of a wider fraying in the bilateral relationship.

"The demographic clock is also ticking and the implications of that are worrisome, to say the least," said Mardupi.

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