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S'pore-Goh

GOH CALLS DR MAHATHIR "A VERY GOOD SPIN DOCTOR"

SINGAPORE, Feb 17 (Bernama) -- Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has described his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, as "a very good spin doctor" after his disclosure that Goh has opposed the building of a new bridge to link both countries.

"I think he spins a story very well. We in Singapore are less good at spinning stories. We prefer the more serious approach," the Straits Times quoted him as saying after attending a community event at the Marine Parade Community Club yesterday.

His remarks came a day after the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) here disputed remarks by Dr Mahathir on Friday, describing the Malaysian premier as an "entertaining story-teller" after his disclosure that Goh did not agree to the construction of the new bridge to replace the Causeway because of Goh's nostalgia over the Causeway.

On Friday, Dr Mahathir, who said that Malaysia would proceed with the construction of the new bridge on the Johor side despite the lack of cooperation from Singapore, also revealed that he was informed by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew that Goh was not in favour of the project.

"Because he (Goh) has a sense of nostalgia over the Causeway, he (Lee) said that we (Malaysia and Singapore) can construct the bridge after Goh Chok Tong's retirement..this is what he (Lee) told me," Dr Mahathir said.

Goh said that Singapore's approach on the bilateral dispute was a "simple one", noting that despite negotiations that lasted some four years, the gap between the two countries had not closed, but had "become wider with each successive round", the Straits Times reported.

That was why, the newspaper said in its front-page headline, Singapore decided that it was useless to hold more talks and declared its readiness to refer Malaysia's demands to raise the price of raw water from the current 3 sen per 1,000 gallons to third-party arbitration.

"We can then concentrate on the bigger issues like economic cooperation and the fight against terrorism," said Goh.

Yesterday, Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said that Singapore manipulated the construction of a new bridge to replace the Johor Causeway by saying it was part of a package of issues being discussed by the two countries.

Malaysia, said Syed Hamid, only informed Singapore of its intention to build the bridge as a sign of respect for the neighbouring country as the Johor Causeway was also part of the republic.

According to the Straits Times, Goh yesterday refused to take the Malaysian bait and engage in what he called "verbal acrobatics" with his counterpart, Dr Mahathir.

"This is not a time to distract our own people...the main thing is the uncertainties facing us this year. We don't need another uncertainty in our relations with Malaysia," he said.

But Goh stood firm on one point: since Malaysia rejected negotiating outstanding bilateral issues as a package, there can be no deal on the bridge, the Straits Times said.

He also favoured a third-party approach to the handling of the difficult issues of Pedra Branca (Pulau Batu Puteh) and the price of water, so that both sides could focus on the positive aspects of their relationship, said the newspaper.

According to the Straits Times, these were his first public comments on

relations with Malaysia since Singapore released last month letters between the leaders of both sides to show that it was not to be blamed for the breakdown in bilateral talks.

Yesterday, Goh declined to respond to Dr Mahathir's remarks, saying: "He just told a story of what Mr Lee told him. So if you want to verify that, you've got to ask Mr Lee that question."

-- BERNAMA

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