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S'pore-Media

WATER ROW MAKES WAY FOR US WAR ON IRAQ

SINGAPORE, Jan 30 (Bernama) -- The water dispute between Malaysia and Singapore took a back seat in Singapore's Straits Times today for US President George W. Bush's speech on the looming showdown with Iraq.

Save for Berita Harian, the English-language daily pushed the debate into its 'Home' page, after four consecutive days of extensive coverage on its Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar's ministerial statement on 'Malaysia-Singapore bilateral ties' in Parliament last Saturday.

Two articles make up almost three-quarter of the page, with one article headlined 'KL Paper Questions If Singapore's Letters Are Real' and another, the Young People's Action Party (PAP)'s statement denying instigating talk of war on its online forum.

According to the Straits Times report, the release of the correspondence between Singapore and Malaysian leaders during the course of bilateral talks on water continued to draw sharp comments in Kuala Lumpur.

It quoted the New Straits Times in its editorial as backing criticisms from Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar as saying that "it is not within acceptable norms to make official correspondence and diplomatic exchanges public."

Malaysia's Berita Harian questioned the authenticity of the letters and notes published by the Singapore media. It said the authenticity could not be verified as those on the website of the Straits Times, for instance, were in Portable Document Format - not pictures of the original documents.

A former Speaker of Singapore Parliament, Tan Soo Khoo defended its government's release of notes and letters between Malaysian and Singapore leaders.

"The documents have the signatures of our prime minister and senior minister, and their prime minister, and they have been tabled in parliament. How can they stoop so low as to question the authenticity of the documents. Have they run out of arguments?" asked Tan.

On Tuesday, Syed Hamid said the exchange of notes and letters between Singapore and Malaysian leaders was only to form the basis of negotiations between officials and ministers, and did not signify any agreement in themselves.

"When we write letters, we think all letters are in confidence to commence discussions. If there is a personal letter from one leader to another leader, there is 'No Prejudice.' They always put 'Without Prejudice'. So we just follow them: 'Without Prejudice'," Syed Hamid told reporters.

The Straits Times also quoted chairman of the Foreign Affairs Government Parliamentary Committee, Dr Ong Chit Chung, who is a military historian by training, as saying: "Nowadays, you can scan documents and put them on the internet. It's nothing unusual."

"As a historian, I know that all documents can be examined and verified by an independent researcher. We cannot put unreal documents on the table. If they're not genuine, they will be uncovered," said Dr Ong.

But by making public, letters and documents on issues under negotiation, it showed that there is lack of good faith, as Syed Hamid pointed out.

"What are they trying to show? I think there is lack of good faith in this particular case. I can tell you it is not our practice to publish letters between leaders on issues that are under negotiation."

"You don't publish these letters. These letters can be published when you are writing memoirs or something like that," said Syed Hamid, referring to the letters on the water issue between leaders of the two countries in 2001 and last year.

Syed Hamid's criticisms on the release of these letters hit front page (page-lead) of The Straits Times paper on Tuesday. Singaporeans' support for its government's stand on water talks was the headline story on that day.

In fact, Malaysia's protests on the matter (release of the letters) were clearly spelt out by Syed Hamid. "It showed Singapore had "all this while no intention of finding a solution" to the stalled water talks."

As Syed Hamid has said: "They can put up as many documents as they like...not everything they say is gospel truth."

"By releasing documents, the real situation is not shown. In fact, they also quoted the statements of Malaysian leaders made in the press as official statements."

"...I have read the documents and I feel that many other things need to be explained, which Singapore did not do."

And all these quotes were boldly printed in today's Straits Times 'Home' Page, with a coloured photo of Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar to accompany the report.

Next to his statements were those of Dr Ong Chit Chung and Tan Soo Khoon, with both photos in colour, and a letter from Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad dated March 11 2002, in blurred prints of black and white.

The Singapore Malay daily, Berita Harian chose to focus on the issue, with an all-out support for the government's stand for making public these letters and documents, making the front page headline yesterday, and today's front page news rebutting Syed Hamid's statement that Malaysia may change law to amend the water pact.

Syed Hamid was quoted to have said on Tuesday that Malaysia was exploring the possibility of using Johor laws in obtaining a higher price for water supplied to Singapore.

He said that the water agreement that expired in 2011 would be allowed to lapse and the agreement that ended in 2061 would not be extended.

"There is nothing to discuss in 100 years, henceforth. There is nothing to be agreed upon," said the minister.

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