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S'pore-Bridge (News Focus)
BRIDGE TALK AHEAD OF PM'S VISIT NEXT WEEK

By: Salbiah Said

SINGAPORE, Jan 7 (Bernama) -- Speculation is already brewing that the proposed bridge to replace the Causeway will likely be raised when Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi calls on his Singapore counterpart, Goh Chok Tong, next week.

Abdullah will make his first official visit as Malaysia's Prime Minister to Singapore on Monday as part of a tour of South-east Asian countries.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar had said that larger Malaysia-Singapore interests would be the focus of talks between the two leaders, and that they "are not expected to specifically discuss thorny outstanding bilateral issues."

"Our relations with Singapore are not just about solving such issues. We have other common interests, ranging from economic to the social well-being of people in both countries," he said after attending an Umno meeting last Sunday.

But ahead of the visit, host Singapore made its voice heard in Parliament on the proposed construction of the bridge, which the city-state opposes.

On Monday, Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar, responding to questions from MPs, said "it did not make sense" for Singapore to build its part of a bridge. He said to build that half, along with revisions to Customs, Immigration and quarantine facilities, would cost more than S\$500 million.

Singapore, he said, reluctantly agreed to the demolition of the Causeway and to build its half of a full bridge only as part of a package deal and which was to have included the supply of water after 2061.

Jayakumar was commenting on "recent overtures" from Malaysia and calls by Johor politician Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad that both nations should resume talks to straighten the "crooked" bridge being built across the Tebrau Straits.

He said the Johor half-bridge should be shelved and Singapore persuaded to build its part for a straight bridge.

"I want the crooked bridge to be straight. I believe it is not too late to pull back. It just requires Singapore to say 'yes'. Let's talk about building a straight bridge," he said last month.

Shahrir's proposal was well-received by Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan who said last month that the Republic was willing to discuss the idea. "I look at this as a game where Singapore and Malaysia can co-operate, both of us will benefit and that is the stuff of a win-win solution we are looking for," he said.

In the past, Singapore had said it was willing to work with Malaysia on the new bridge - but only if it was included in a package of bilateral issues to be discussed, including Malaysia's supply of water to Singapore after 2061.

When the water issue was separated from the package in October last year, Singapore called off its plans for a new bridge.

It was this stand-off that prompted Malaysia to go it alone, with the then Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, saying there was no choice but to opt for a "crooked" bridge because of environmental and commercial necessities.

He said an elevated bridge was imperative to improve water quality and allow the passage of cargo between the ports of Tanjung Pelepas and Pasir Gudang in Johor.

In response to MPs' questions in Singapore Parliament on Monday, Jayakumar also said that Singapore had pointed out in its third-party note to Malaysia that international facilities such as the Causeway could not be lawfully demolished without the approval, agreement and involvement of both States.

Jayakumar also said that Malaysia had not sought consultation or agreement with Singapore for its plan to replace its half of the Causeway with a new bridge.

In response to Jayakumar's statement in Parliament, Syed Hamid told

reporters in Putrajaya yesterday that Malaysia would not engage in a public debate over its plans to build a bridge to replace the Johor Causeway.

He also reiterated that Malaysia's bilateral relations with its neighbours should not be based upon just an examination of issues, but rather on political, economic, social and cultural links to build a deeper, stronger relationship.

"From time to time, as usual, as neighbours we may have differences on matters that affect each other, but it should not mar the overall long-term relationship," he said.

In his remarks, he also said that "Malaysia only undertakes its development plans or activities within its territory without trying to impinge on the legal rights of others."

He said that Singapore should consult Malaysia if it was not satisfied with something, adding that disagreements and misunderstandings between the two countries would occur sometimes.

Meanwhile, work on the RM460 million bridge, measuring 1.4km from the Johor-Singapore boundary to the new Customs, Immigration and Quarantine Complex in Johor Baru, is already under way.

Gerbang Perdana Sdn Bhd, the project developer, has commenced rock-fill work in the Tebrau Straits to strengthen the sea-bed to create a foundation for the bridge abutment.

According to project engineers, it is definitely not too late for Singapore to straighten things out with Malaysia, the New Straits Times reported.

A straight bridge, it said, would not only mean significant savings in time and money, but also be a lasting testimony of the long-established political, economic and social ties that bind the two neighbours.

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