

22 AUG 2004

S'pore-Bilateral

LEE LOOKS FORWARD TO WORKING WITH M'SIAN PREMIER

By: Salbiah Said

SINGAPORE, Aug 22 (Bernama) -- Singapore's new Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong says he looks forward to working with his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to strengthen bilateral ties.

"I have known Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi for many years already. Under him our relations have made a fresh start. I look forward to working with him to strengthen our cooperation," he said in his National Day Rally speech tonight.

In his first major policy speech since taking over the helm last week, Lee said that despite the challenges in its relations with Malaysia under former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Singapore did its best to maintain good relations with its neighbour.

"When Prime Minister Mahathir pressured us to change the Water Agreements, we stood firmly by our legal rights. We gave a full public explanation of the negotiations with Malaysia, and why we were justified in international law and were prepared to go to any international tribunal.

Lee said Singapore's closest neighbours, Indonesia and Malaysia, would always be of special importance.

"The one thing that will not change is our approach to foreign relations. We seek to be friends with all countries, especially our immediate neighbours and the major powers.

"We pursue win-win co-operation with all countries which are willing to cooperate with us. But that does not mean that we can always accommodate the views or positions of other countries.

"When our vital interests are at stake, we must quietly stand our ground. As Dr Habibie said, Singapore is a little red dot. If we don't defend our interests, who will?"

This approach, said Lee, had earned Singapore respect internationally, and a network of good relations with many countries around the world. But, from time to time, Singapore was put to the test, and as a small country, it could not afford to flinch, he said.

"When Michael Fay was sentenced to caning for vandalism, President Bill Clinton wrote on his behalf, but we could not remit the sentence to cane. People in Asia noted our stand," he said before an audience which included his father, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and his predecessor, now Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong.

--BERNAMA

SS AO