

09 JAN 2004

S'pore-Visit (Curtain Raiser)

PM'S VISIT TO SINGAPORE - NEW CHAPTER IN BILATERAL RELATIONS

By: Salbiah Said

SINGAPORE, Jan 9 (Bernama) -- Fresh from appointing his deputy and reshuffling the Cabinet, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is due to arrive here on Monday, amidst hopes that his visit will open a new chapter in bilateral relations.

Datuk Seri Abdullah will make his first official visit as Malaysia's Prime Minister to Singapore as part of a tour of Southeast Asian nations.

The Prime Minister's one-day visit to the city-state is part of the long-held tradition of new Asean leaders.

Yesterday, Abdullah held discussions with Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, as part of his first official visit to Indonesia as Prime Minister.

Malaysia and Singapore have had a testy relationship ever since the republic left the Malaysian federation in 1965 with ties strained by a number of unresolved issues, some dating back to the British colonial period.

They are locked in a legal battle over land reclamation works being carried out by Singapore in waters bordering Malaysia and the matter is now before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

Other sources of tension include the price of water Malaysia supplies to Singapore, a prospective bridge linking the countries, the use of Malaysian airspace by Singapore military aircraft and ownership of a rocky islet.

Singapore Foreign Minister S.Jayakumar early this week called for an end to the long-standing acrimony that has plagued relations with Malaysia as the republic laid the groundwork for Datuk Seri Abdullah's visit.

He told parliament it was time to open a new chapter between the two nations, stressing warmer ties would be of mutual benefit.

"I think the challenge for both sides in the new era is to look

for ways of starting a new chapter in bilateral relations," he said.

There are already signs of a warming in relations.

Datuk Seri Abdullah's Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong and his Cabinet Ministers are due to attend Malaysia's National Chinese New Year Open House in Johor Baharu on Jan 24.

Analysts said a meeting in Johor Baharu would be significant since many of the disputes between Singapore and Malaysia involved the southern state of Johor, which wants to become a regional transport hub.

Hopes of better ties increased after Datuk Seri Abdullah met Goh on the sidelines of a regional meeting in Tokyo late last year. It was the first time the pair had met since Datuk Seri Abdullah took over the stewardship from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Oct 31 last year.

"I am certain that both Prime Minister Goh and Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi will discuss issues in the same positive and forward-looking manner as in their first meeting in Tokyo," Jayakumar said ahead of the Malaysian Prime Minister's visit.

No agenda had been set for the meeting between the two Prime Ministers but Singapore was open to any issues and proposals the Malaysian Prime Minister would want to raise during his visit, Jayakumar said.

Speculation is also rife that the proposed bridge to replace the Johor Causeway will likely be discussed during the four-eyed meeting between the two leaders.

"I think we need to replace the Causeway because we must allow the water to flow through and that is very important, and this is also something we have to talk together," Datuk Seri Abdullah said ahead of his visit to Singapore.

In an interview with Channel News Asia aired last night, the Malaysian Prime Minister also said he preferred to resolve the Malaysia-Singapore water dispute through bilateral talks instead of arbitration.

"I am sure we have a chance to solve, there must be a way out. I cannot imagine it is impossible to find any kind of amicable solution," he said.

"We can talk, let's sit down and talk, I think we can handle it, I am sure there are ways...I am trying to find when can we begin, when can we resume," he said.

Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who is likely to succeed Goh this year, has expressed optimism that ties with Malaysia would improve under Datuk Seri Abdullah.

Lee, in an interview with Chinese daily Lianhe Ziaobao in November, last year, said that there would be "no once-and-for-all" solutions to the problems that have strained ties but believed the two countries must still work together despite their differences.

"I think we will continue to work towards resolving our problems. There is no once-and-for-all solution," Lee added.

While here, Datuk Seri Abdullah will also call on President S.R.Nathan and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

-- BERNAMA  
SS SS AAM