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Bad faith in bad Press

IT has become crystal clear now what Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad meant when, in an exclusive interview with this newspaper a month ago, he mentioned that Malaysia often faced problems in its dealings with Singapore because the republic did not always follow accepted norms. The comment, though made in the context of what was happening in the Pulau Batu Puteh dispute, would fit in just as well if used to describe the republic's latest transgression.

Certainly, it is not within accepted norms to make official correspondence and diplomatic exchanges public. But that was what Singapore chose to do with regard to documents and letters on its water deal with Malaysia. Other than bringing to the fore yet again its lack of ethics, it is baffling why it resorted to making newspapers publish 19 such letters over the past few days - especially when newspapers in the republic are not exactly known for aggressive candour.

The irony is that politicians across the Causeway are always blaming the Malaysian media for what they describe as fanning sentiments, even war-mongering, when they themselves are turning the water issue - and by extension already sticky bilateral relations - into a media circus.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar was right to describe Singapore's action in releasing those letters as lacking in good faith. And this is especially so when the matter, though drawn out and seemingly deadlocked, has not gone past the negotiation stage.

Perhaps Singapore has other reasons for its latest provocation. Maybe it is intended to distract its neighbour and its own people from other bigger schemes in the making. But a spanner in the works is little help. Intentions and sincerity play a good part in any negotiation because the ultimate aim is to find a solution. By its latest action Singapore has unreservedly displayed its lack of will in finding a solution. Perhaps it doesn't want a settlement