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PM: We did not warn Indon navy

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PETALING JAYA, Sun. - Malaysia did not warn off Indonesian naval vessels when they approached Pulau Sipadan and Pulau Ligitan in the past unlike Singapore's present behaviour in relation to Pulau Batu Puteh.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that the republic did not have the right to issue warnings or threaten Malaysia over naval vessels patrolling near the disputed island.

This was because the issue of who owned the island was still under dispute, the Prime Minister added.

"Indonesians came and landed on the islands.

"We did not stop them although the issue of who owned the islands was under dispute ...but we did not fight against them or shoo them away. We did not behave like Singapore," he said on his return from visits to Lebanon, Egypt and Switzerland.

Dr Mahathir said this when asked to comment on Singapore Foreign Affairs Minister S. Jayakumar's statement in Parliament yesterday that the republic's actions on Pulau Batu Puteh were no different in law from Malaysia's actions in relation to Pulau Sipadan.

Jayakumar had said that Malaysia claimed it had never done similar "unfriendly" or "unneighbourly" acts to Indonesia in their dispute over Sipadan and Ligitan.

Asked to comment on Singapore Defence Minister Dr Tan Keng Yam's statement on Thursday urging Malaysia to stop repeated intrusions by the Malaysian navy and police boats into Singapore waters off Pulau Batu Puteh, Dr Mahathir said: "Malaysia has the right to continue patrolling near the island so long as the International Court of Justice has not decided who has sovereign right over the island."

Dr Tan had said that if such intrusions continued, Malaysia would have to bear responsibility for any tense situations that arose and the increased risks of unintended incidents.

Pulau Batu Puteh, which Singapore calls Pedra Branca, is located 7.7 nautical miles from Tanjung Penyusop in Johor and 25 nautical miles from Singapore's east coast.

When told that Singapore was willing to settle the water issue, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would study the matter.

Earlier, asked about his visit to Lebanon, Egypt and Switzerland where he attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, Dr Mahathir said: "There is remarkable reconstruction being done in Beirut and one cannot imagine it was almost destroyed by the war. There are many high-rise buildings and the town centre is restored completely."

He said Beirut was interested in having Malaysians carry out their reconstruction and, of course, it had to be by tender and not negotiation made directly to them.

"Beirut is recovering fast and they want us to participate in the building of shopping complexes and other construction works."

He said Lebanon was also becoming a tourist destination as it was the only country in West Asia to have snow, and skiing was a popular sport that attracted a lot of tourists.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was being increasingly recognised as a model Islamic State, particularly by people from other Islamic nations, and this was seen during his visit to the three countries.

"It is true ...every one of them, (Prime Minister of Lebanon Rafic)

Hariri, members of his Cabinet, as well as President (Emile) Lahoud consider Malaysia a model Islamic State."

Dr Mahathir said he also addressed 1,000 students and staff of Cairo's Al-Azhar University besides having a long talk with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak whom he had invited to Malaysia.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who welcomed Dr Mahathir at the airport, said the invitation to the Prime Minister by Al-Azhar University was in recognition of his stature as a leader of an Islamic State.

In Davos, Dr Mahathir who had participated in four sessions of the WEF, said he had expressed Malaysia's views on terrorism.

He said his visit to Davos had enabled him to explain and correct the wrong interpretation of so-called Islamic terrorism, and at the same time, point out that attacking Iraq was not going to help the situation.