

02/07/2003

Dr M not confident of water pact

Ramlan Said

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is not hopeful of a resolution to the water dispute with Singapore before he steps down in October.

He said there was no light at the end of the tunnel because the republic had failed to accept the reality that the price it was paying to Malaysia now was too low and unrealistic.

He said there was also no need to meet his counterpart Goh Chok Tong to resolve the impasse as previous talks had failed to produce any results.

"No, no, there are no plans (to resume negotiations) as we can't reach any agreement. And now they have made public the matter, it will be more difficult to talk or write (about it). If we write, they will use it as propaganda or evidence against us," he said when asked to comment on the printing and distribution of a booklet by Singapore containing extracts of official correspondence between the two countries on the water issue.

He was speaking after opening a convention on gold dinar as an alternative international currency at the Putra World Trade Centre.

On allowing the courts to resolve the deadlock, he said this could be done but Malaysia was entitled to present its version of events.

"We will have to explain every point. We will give our version of the problem," he said when asked whether Malaysia would publish its own booklet to explain its side of the story.

He said such an explanation could be done through the publication of a booklet or having the details published in newspapers.

On whether Malaysia would publish letters and correspondence on the negotiations, he said the Government would not resort to something unethical.

"We don't make public letters and correspondence. We strictly follow international practice, which says that you don't release private letters and correspondence."

Singapore, he said, was not only making profit at Malaysia's expense as it was supplied with water priced at three sen per 4,500 litres but had also blamed Malaysia for the collapse in negotiations.

Saying the issue at hand was simple, he said there was simply no way that anything for which a price was fixed in 1927 could be sold at the same price today.

"If Singapore can sell us something now, perhaps land at three sen, which was the price in 1927, then we would like to buy it."

He said it was absurd for anyone to continue paying something at the 1927 price.

"Whether it is 45 sen, 60 sen or RM3, that is something that we have to negotiate, but certainly not three sen."

Negotiations between ministers and senior officials of the two countries on several occasions failed to make much progress.

In the first round of talks in Kuala Lumpur in July last year, Malaysia proposed that Singapore pay 60 sen for 1,000 gallons of water from now until 2007. From 2007 to 2011, the price was to be fixed at RM3.

After 2011, Malaysia wanted a price structure using a new formula, which was rejected by Singapore.

Singapore, however, proposed to pay 45 sen per 1,000 gallons from now until 2011, after which the price was to be fixed at 60 sen until 2061 and would go on for another 100 years.

Once the 2011 agreement lapses, the amount would be reduced to 250 million gallons per day until the second agreement runs out in 2061.

Other issues between the two countries involved the shifting of the Keretapi Tanah Melayu station from Tanjung Pagar to Woodlands and the status of the KTM land in Singapore; the relocation of the Malaysian Customs, Immigration and Quarantine complex in Tanjung Pagar; the Central Provident Fund withdrawals by Peninsular Malaysia workers no longer working in Singapore; and the use of Malaysian airspace by low-flying Singapore air force jets.

The water issue came to a boil when Singapore published correspondence between leaders of the two countries in The Strait Times.