

04/01/2003

We have the right to carry out surveillance, says Syed Hamid

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PUTRAJAYA, Fri. - Malaysia has the right to carry out surveillance in the waters around Pulau Batu Puteh because these are Malaysian waters, even if Singapore is claiming the island off Johor.

"We consider it our waters, so we hope that when we carry out our surveillance, Singapore will not interfere with our right," said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

He added that Malaysia could even land on the island if it wanted to, but to avoid creating further tension, "we will just move around the waters near the island".

He said the matter was discussed at the National Security Council meeting chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad earlier today, as "it had created too much public interest".

Syed Hamid said although Singapore claimed the right to monitor the island, the status quo should be maintained.

"We should not do anything to upset the position of Pulau Batu Puteh and there should not be any aggression."

He also said the Government had to study the dates - Jan 27 or 28 - proposed by Singapore for the signing of the Special Agreement to take the dispute to the International Court of Justice.

"If we do not agree with the dates, we will propose another," he said at Wisma Putra's Hari Raya open house today.

Syed Hamid said he received a note from Singapore's Foreign Ministry today suggesting that the agreement be signed on the sidelines of the upcoming Asean-European Union meeting in Brussels.

"You cannot simply assume that just because Singapore gives the date, it is a finality.

"We gave them six or seven dates last year, and Singapore said it would think about it, so this time we have to think about it too," he said.

The most recent date proposed by Malaysia was in November last year, but "Singapore kept quiet and never gave reasons why it did not accept the dates".

Syed Hamid also questioned the rationale of having the agreement signed in Brussels when Singapore and Malaysia were very close neighbours.

"Our capitals are so close, just 45 minutes by air."

The dispute over Pulau Batu Puteh arose in 1979, and both countries agreed in 1998 on the text of the Special Agreement to refer the matter to the ICJ. However, they could not agree on a suitable date.