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Syed Hamid: Stop making baseless allegations

JOHOR BARU, Sun. - The Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs must stop making baseless allegations and disrespectful remarks against the Malaysian leadership if it wants to avoid further souring of relations between the two countries, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said today.

He said this in response to a statement issued by the Singapore ministry yesterday, which rebutted part of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's speech on Friday.

Dr Mahathir had touched on the "nostalgic" reasons for the republic's unwillingness to replace the Causeway.

Dr Mahathir had delivered the speech at the ground-breaking ceremony of the Gerbang Selatan Bersepadu (Southern Integrated Gateway) project, which includes the construction of a new bridge to replace the Malaysian side of the Causeway.

The republic's statement had, among other things, described Dr Mahathir as an "entertaining story-teller" and urged those who wanted to understand the issue to refer to the exchange of letters between Malaysian and Singaporean leaders on the matter.

Syed Hamid said the building of the bridge had never been part of the package deal negotiated between the two countries, contrary to the claim by the Singapore Foreign Ministry.

The package deal includes the use of Malaysian airspace by the Singapore air force, the status of Keretapi Tanah Melayu's land in the republic and Malaysian workers' savings in the Singapore Central Provident Fund.

Water supply was initially included in the package but was later taken out and negotiated separately.

He said he was present at the meeting where Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew told Dr Mahathir the republic could not agree to immediately replacing the Causeway with a bridge.

"I was there when Lee Kuan Yew told Dr Mahathir that (Singapore Prime Minister) Goh Chok Tong had opposed the plan (to build the bridge) because he was nostalgic about the Causeway.

"Lee had said that it would be better for the Causeway to be replaced with a bridge in 2007 (the year Goh ends his tenure as prime minister).

"Dr Mahathir was not telling a fantasy story. They should check with Lee to verify the issue," he said.

He said this after the opening of the Johor Baru Umno Youth, Wanita and Puteri meetings at Bukit Chagar here.

Present were Johor Baru Umno division chief Datuk Shahrir Samad and his deputy Datuk Mohamed Khalid Nordin.

Earlier, Syed Hamid said Malaysians, especially Johor Baru residents, should continue to welcome Singaporeans because they were not to blame for the "unfriendly" actions of their leaders.

"Singaporeans are our relatives and friends. I believe they can understand the actual scenario of our bilateral problem despite their leadership's attempts to twist the facts.

"Some of my Singaporean friends have told me they are embarrassed that they are paying just three sen for 1,000 gallons of our water. They said that three sen, if converted to their currency, almost did not have any value at all."

He added that the most significant difference between Singapore and

Malaysia was the republic leadership's insistence on getting its "bottom line".