

31/05/2003

Good time now to get Limbang issue sorted out

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THE regular bilateral summit meetings between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei underscore the underlying strength of the brotherly relations between our two countries.

It is of course impossible to establish what goes on when the two leaders meet privately but it is a well-known fact that the only other Asean leader with whom the Sultan has comparable rapport is with Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

On the surface, Malaysia-Brunei ties could not have been better in recent years.

The Sultan makes many regular visits even when not called upon by official duties to do so. Ties with Malaysian royalty are equally strong and assiduously cultivated through frequent exchange of visits.

Leaders from Sabah and Sarawak also make frequent calls to the sultanate and are treated with all the courtesies of visiting official dignitaries, including the personal attention of the Sultan.

Ties to the two States have been further forged with the recent establishment of Brunei consulates in Kota Kinabalu and Kuching and the opening of a consulate in Miri soon.

The appointment of a Sarawakian, Tan Sri Jamil Johari, as new High Commissioner to Brunei can only cement ties even more.

All this is a far cry from the days of the early 70s when then Sarawak Chief Minister Tun Abdul Rahman Ya'kub openly feuded with the previous Sultan, the late father of the present Sultan.

The main issue then was the highly emotive and sensitive matter of the unresolved Brunei claim to Limbang in Sarawak.

It is a matter of some regret that despite the decades of "cooling-off" and genuine warmth between leaders of both countries, the Limbang claim remains largely swept under the carpet. So long as it remains that way, it will never be resolved.

It has now come to light that there is a Malaysian proposal on the table of several years' standing for the territorial dispute to be resolved.

Territorial disputes can arouse the most primordial of national sentiments and must naturally be treated with the utmost delicacy. There will be opportune and inopportune times for such matters to be tackled.

The opportune time has probably arrived. Yet the window of opportunity may soon close with the retirement of Dr Mahathir.

Resolving the Limbang claim above all demands statesmanship of the highest order.

It necessarily involves compromises and compromises over territorial matters can only stick if forged by statesmen of the calibre of Dr Mahathir and Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah.

Presumably the Malaysian offer over the Limbang claim will form some basis for negotiations between the two countries. Malaysia, as the much larger of the two countries, has shown over recent years that it takes great pains not to appear as the "bully" with Brunei.

Also, the credibility of Dr Mahathir in the eyes of Malaysians is such that probably he and he alone (at least for the foreseeable future) will have the stature to carry the "burden" of what would be viewed as a magnanimous compromise by Malaysia over Limbang.

Hence the Malaysian urgency to have this settled before Dr Mahathir retires in a matter of months.

Both Malaysia, in particular Sabah and Sarawak, and Brunei can hardly wait to see this long-standing bilateral irritant finally removed.

Nothing perhaps will best encapsulate how people in the three Borneo States, intertwined by ties of kinship, geography and economics, will welcome a peaceful resolution of the Limbang claim than the final removal of the ridiculous reality of motorists from Brunei having to collect a grand total of 16 passport stamps if they were to make a weekend trip to Kota Kinabalu and back!