

04/08/2003

Malaysia wants arbitration soon

Hamidah Atan

PORT DICKSON, Sun. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said Malaysia wants arbitration over the water dispute to get going quickly but believes that Singapore will try to delay it.

He said Malaysia wanted to get the process under way as soon as possible.

"But I am sure that Singapore will try to delay until the year 2011 when the agreement expires," he said.

He reiterated that the door for negotiations over the water price was closed, and the issue would have to be resolved through arbitration.

Yesterday, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said Malaysia had appointed a lawyer to begin the process as delays would be to the country's detriment.

Singapore buys raw water from Malaysia at three sen per 1,000 gallons under two agreements, one signed in 1961 and the other in 1962. The first agreement expires in 2011.

On a newspaper article which claimed that Malaysia was using the issue to limit development in the republic, Dr Mahathir said even if Singapore had to pay RM10 for every 1,000 gallons, the republic would not become poor.

The article, written by freelance writer Chen Jinshun in Singapore's Chinese daily Lianhe Zao Bao, was carried by the Singapore Straits Times.

Among other matters, Chen also claimed that the agreements had helped Malaysia, a poor country, to reap big profits, and Malaysian politicians had resorted to their "normal gangster-style way" to tarnish the image of the republic.

Dr Mahathir said there was no truth in the allegations.

"We have done the calculations. (Even) If it pays RM10 for every 1,000 gallons of water, it will never become poor. Singapore is rich and its per capita income is US\$24,000 (RM91,200), ours is only US\$4,000.

"It is a rich country...how are we going to give it such a rate for water?"

He said Malaysia was only trying to uphold the principle but "if we sell and buy things, the prices should be reasonable".

The Prime Minister said the article was written with the aim of diverting attention.

"The real issue is three sen for the price of water. Those days, when we negotiated, we considered all the problems faced by Singapore Government.

"Actually, I don't have to tell all this (but) they made baseless allegations against us, especially their foreign minister who made statements in Parliament, exposed our letters and then wrote a book. I just want to tell the truth."

On the new ruling on visas imposed by the United States, Dr Mahathir said it was their right to come up with such a move.

"They think they are suspicious of the Malaysians, what can we do about it?"

Dr Mahathir said the Government would not object. "We will not object ...so long they do not kacau (interfere in) our country."

Applicants of nonimmigrant visas to the US, including Malaysians, are now required to personally appear before the US consular officer at the embassy. The ruling came into effect today.

Dr Mahathir, who arrived in Port Dickson yesterday, earlier launched the

Prime Minister's Office Family Day at a beach near Guoman Resort.

Also present were his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and Finance Minister II Datuk Jamaluddin Jarjis.

The Prime Minister spent more than five hours, mingling with the office staff and participating in a few events such as the traditional Chinese art of self-defence, tai chi and making teh tarik.

Asked to comment on the three Malaysians allegedly asked to strip for checks by the New Zealand authorities on their arrival in Auckland on July 19, Dr Mahathir expressed his sadness.

"Malaysians are generally very responsible people and they don't indulge in unhealthy or negative activities.

"Those who do that (involved in such activities) will already have been arrested by the (Malaysian) Government."

Liew Eng Teck, Tan Teck Hing and How Ah Wan claimed to have been told to strip for checks when they arrived for a 10-day holiday. They also claimed to have been put in a lock-up overnight before being sent home the following morning.

Meanwhile, in Malacca, they said they would contact Wisma Putra tomorrow to file an official report.

They have prepared a letter about their nasty experience there.