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Malaysian media get `special attention'

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THE Malay adage gajah sama gajah bertembung, pelandok mati di tengah-tengah (when two elephants fight, the mousedeer dies in between) just about describes the fate of the Malaysian media at the hands of Singapore politicians and media alike.

The Straits Times, which had been carrying articles overly critical of the Malaysian media, started singing a different tune last Thursday.

This could have been due to the signing of the special agreement between Foreign Ministers of both countries the same day on the issue of Pulau Batu Puteh (Pedra Branca to Singapore).

In a story headlined "Malaysian media: More conciliatory now", the newspaper stated that there appeared to be a "change in the tone of reports and commentaries in the Malaysian media the past week since Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Jan 30 assessment of bilateral ties".

Citing the New Straits Times' Saturday editorial as an example, The Straits Times said the NST had stated that Malaysia had no quarrel with Singaporeans and that the nation's doors were open to Singaporeans. It tacitly agreed with the editorial that Malaysia neither had military aspirations nor a desire to cut water supply to the republic.

The Straits Times also noted that Malaysia's Berita Harian "which has had the most hardline stance" had refrained from publishing editorials or commentaries about bilateral ties since last Sunday.

(SPH Holdings also publishes a Malay newspaper, called the Berita Harian, which is a sister-paper of The Straits Times.)

The newspaper referred to the weekend edition of the Berita Harian - the Berita Minggu Malaysia - which had taken the Straits Times to task for the tenor of its coverage of the Pulau Batu Puteh issue.

The Straits Times noted that most newspapers also carried remarks by Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman who had acknowledged the strong ties between Singaporeans and Malaysians. But it took a dig at Utusan Malaysia columnist, Awang Selamat, for chiding "Singapore's move to publish the exchange of letters between leaders, saying these were personal in nature".

As The Straits Times castigated the Malaysian media for giving a partisan tint to reports on bilateral issues, it indulged in the same with a piece on Feb 1 headlined "Just what is KL up to".

The standfirst was a dead give-away, saying "Malaysian politicians and newspapers have stepped up their offensive after Singapore made public all the exchanges with Malaysia in their protracted water talks".

Senior writer Lee Kim Chew said "Malaysian newspapers have been fanning anti-Singapore sentiments on the issue in recent months". The rest of the article was an undisguised attempt to promote the Singapore cause in the water issue under the mantle of fair comment.

In the relentless and continuing tale of Malaysian media-bashing, The Straits Times yesterday went back to singing its old tune.

It said Malaysian newspapers' coverage of the signing of the special agreement zoomed in on how the event "became a verbal sparring match between Singapore and Malaysia's foreign ministers".

"Fiery language: There's no mincing of words, as Malaysian papers took the side of the nation," The Straits Times said.

The Utusan Malaysia came in for special mention, its headline "Jayakumar

creates tension" cited as proof of Singapore-baiting. The Berita Harian also received equal play with its headline "Singapore slyness in exploiting the agreement" being highlighted.

On Friday, The Straits Times printed a headline that read "How nations go to war by accident" in which academician Bernard Loo outlined how "the barrage of words between both countries had raised fears of a possible conflict breaking out between the two neighbours".