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Onward to arbitration

MALAYSIA has finally been forced to take the water dispute with Singapore to arbitration. Much as we have tried to use the voice of reason to resolve the issue through negotiation, Singapore's intransigence has closed the door to any possibility of further dialogue. With the failure of talks, both nations are now compelled to look to a third party for a decision which could easily have been arrived at bilaterally. The die having been cast, the only reasonable expectation for Malaysia at this juncture is an early resolution of the dispute so that we can direct our efforts towards the more immediate needs of the nation.

Yet, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's warning that Singapore may deliberately delay arbitration until 2011 when the first of the two water agreements expires is indicative of the extent the republic may be prepared to go to "win" its case. It is also a sad reflection of the craft and cunning, and lack of sincerity, of the republic's leaders which led to the present stalemate. That Singapore may be capable of such disingenuous methods to get its own way cannot, therefore, be discounted. Attempts at obfuscation will, however, not stand the test of reason at the table of arbitration. We are confident that the arbitrators will see the issue for what it is - a straightforward case of a party unwilling to pay a just price for an increasingly precious commodity.

Both sides should now ensure that arbitration begins unhindered. Malaysia has hitherto played the role of peacemaker in negotiations by reiterating its unreserved guarantee of the supply of water to Singapore. This has been guided by the fact that we have always acted in good faith despite the unhappy parting of ways in 1965. While we have placed that unfortunate episode behind us, the reverse appears evident with Singapore. It has had a record of biting the hand that feeds it with petty displays of irritation over issues that could have been resolved with tact and diplomacy.

It is hoped that arbitration as provided for under the existing water agreements will resolve the issue for good. Singapore should remember, however, that history is replete with instances of one-upmanship gone too far. That this should not be attempted with an immediate neighbour, whatever the points of contention, will eventually be made clear to the republic.