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Relations heading into stormy waters?

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RARELY do I feel compelled to dash for the newspapers every morning to see what's in them. The advertisements on the water dispute between Malaysia and Singapore that have been appearing since last Sunday, however, have aroused my curiosity.

It is much like following a good serial movie: you can't wait to see what's next. The first thing I look for is therefore the water ads.

But given my usual chronic curiosity, I couldn't help but surf the Net to see how our friends across the Causeway are reacting to them.

As expected, it was most interesting. The Singapore Government, the newspaper editors and columnists, and the letters carried by the media don't seem to be at all pleased by their neighbour's ads.

Except for one or two, however, the criticisms have not been too shrill thus far. Perhaps, it is because Malaysia was merely putting out the facts as it sees them, and there was little the Singapore Government could challenge with any credibility.

Or perhaps Singaporeans are able to appreciate Malaysia's case better now, and are quietly questioning their own Government. Is that the reason why the Singapore papers, which carried the first two ads, chose not to carry the third and fourth?

One can be sure, however, that the Government and its Press are hard at work to come out with more solid rejoinders to contain the damage to Singapore's spin on the water issue.

In the meantime though, the Singapore responses have been anything but credible. The best the Government could do to counter charges of exorbitant profiteering was to call them "old stories" and "tired arguments".

It must have been embarrassed when its challenge that Malaysia go beyond this to "the substance of the facts" happened to be immediately followed by ads from Malaysia that did go into substance.

A second Government response, this time from the Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, linked Malaysia's action to the general election next year, and to allege that Singapore was again being used as a "bogeyman". Well, the elections can hardly be the reason as they are still a long way away. Common sense would expect a more honest response to the profiteering charge.

Malaysia's response was also described as "puzzling", because it comes six months after the island's Foreign Minister's statement in Parliament in January, and three months after the publication of the Singapore Government booklet carrying the substance of the statement.

The Malaysian Government must respond to this and help relieve Singapore officialdom of its puzzlement. But as an outsider I just wonder. Could it be that Malaysia would not have felt it necessary to come out with its own booklet and advertisements if Singapore had let the matter end with the statement in Parliament, which was covered fully in the media?

Why the need for Singapore to publish a booklet of the statement and circulate it to embassies here and around the world, sell it in the market, and put it on its website?

When Singapore does these completely unnecessary and provocative things, does it expect Malaysia to do nothing?

If Malaysia merely responds in kind to set the record straight, why should officials in Singapore be upset? Or be "puzzled"? Isn't it the most

natural thing for any respectable country to do?

Malaysia producing a booklet three months after Singapore's is quick indeed and should not be "puzzling". Singapore took three months to publish a booklet that merely built around the parliamentary statement, without need for research.

Now there is news from Singapore that Jack Neo is going to release Homerun, a film that apparently satirises the water dispute, with scenes that could be construed as poking fun at Malaysia's Prime Minister.

The film will reportedly premiere in August, and tickets have already been sold in schools. There are plans to screen it in Malaysia in September.

This may be a genuinely private initiative. But anyone can see how much damage it is going to do to relations between the two countries and to goodwill between their two people. Why this theme? Why in August and September, when Prime Minister Mahathir is going to hand over in October? Why deliberately sell tickets in schools, and prejudice if not poison the minds of the next generation?

Singapore must take full responsibility for allowing this to happen, and for any further deterioration in relations as a result. It cannot pretend "puzzlement" if Malaysia hits back in similar measure three or six months later.

There must be a minimum of decorum and fair conduct in relations among nations, especially among nations that consider themselves friendly neighbours. There must also be a sense of responsibility.

Absent these, I fear we are heading into stormy waters.