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SARS another irritant in Malaysia-Singapore ties

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THE Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak seems to have "joined" the list of irritants between Malaysia and Singapore, with the republic criticised for allowing passengers with SARS symptoms to board flights at Changi Airport.

Berita Harian, which chided the republic's health authorities in its editorial on May 14, yesterday published in its weekend edition Berita Minggu the response from Singapore Minister of State for Health and Environment Dr Balaji Sadasivan, who said it had done everything it could to contain and prevent the disease from spreading.

His statement was published by the Singapore Berita Harian.

He said Singapore had implemented various measures at all entry points to detect those with SARS symptoms.

"So far, we have inspected more than 120,000 air travellers. Only four have been admitted to hospital but these have also turned out to be non-SARS. You can check everyone but he can fall sick while in the plane."

Berita Minggu described the remarks as an attempt to defend the slip-up that saw several sick passengers being allowed to board Malaysia-bound flights at Changi Airport.

Mingguan Malaysia also high-lighted the cases of sick passengers escaping the predeparture screening for SARS at the airport, which led to criticism that Singapore might be trying to "export" the disease to Malaysia.

Mingguan Malaysia reported in its front page that Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi wanted Singapore to provide an explanation about the slip-up.

He said it was important that the republic clear up the matter fast to prevent unpleasant theories from surfacing. This was more so as the republic had declared that it had put in place stringent screening measures at Changi Airport.

The paper's columnist, Maulana, also had his sights on Singapore, focusing on the republic's free-trade agreement with the United States.

He said the republic's media and the Asian Wall Street Journal were portraying the agreement as the US rewarding countries which supported its campaign in Iraq.

Maulana said: "Although Singapore has stated openly that the US should not penalise Malaysia, the US threatening action against Malaysia is welcomed by Singapore, with its media gleefully reporting the matter."

Meanwhile, Utusan Malaysia on Saturday highlighted a proposal that a fund be set up to help hawkers and petty traders obtain loans.

This was in view of difficulties faced by them in securing financial assistance from banks.

The Federal Territory Hawkers and Petty Traders Association president Baharim Abdul Razak said the fund could be established under the economic stimulus package to help sectors affected by the Iraqi war and SARS.

"Except loans under Tekun, there is no other facility providing soft loans for traders and hawkers, especially those involved in home-based products."

He said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had proposed that banks set up a special loan unit to help hawkers and petty traders.