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Singapore's handling of Pulau Batu Puteh making news in the media

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THE new year began on an uneasy note with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad warning any nation with pre-emptive strikes or "forward defence" on its mind of a "bloody nose" if it intended to pursue such moves in 2003.

While the Prime Minister took pains in the interest of diplomatic courtesy to refrain from naming the nations in mind, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar readily identified Singapore as the nation referred to in relation to the "forward defence" strategy.

Given Australian Prime Minister John Howard's recent predilection with the possibility of pre-emptive strikes against nations in Asia suspected of harbouring terrorists, it was obvious which country Dr Mahathir had in mind when talking of the other defensive move.

The Bahasa Malaysia newspapers continued to play up the issue of Malaysia and Singapore's claim over Pulau Batu Puteh (Pedra Branca to Singapore) with space going largely to statements by Malaysian leaders on the republic's "arrogance" manifested in the manner in which it was pursuing its claim.

Not a day went by last week without news about the disputed island on the front pages of Berita Harian and Utusan Malaysia.

Berita Harian, in an editorial yesterday, gave support to the statement by Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim that all agreements between Malaysia and other nations should be reviewed to make them sensitive to contemporary needs. It said that there was a dire need to tighten and contemporise these agreements as the nation could be held to ransom by other quarters.

Berita Harian said agreements signed before independence in 1957 may not be appropriate for the current scenario with its 21st century dynamics. It argued that the agreements may also have been drafted without Malaysia's interest at heart.

Berita Harian singled out the 1961 and 1962 water agreements with Singapore as an example of agreements not in keeping with the current cost of living.

It said the three sen per 1,000 gallons was based on a 1927 pricing arrangement.

In a comment aimed at displaying the absurdity of retaining the three sen price, it said the figure was from an era when a packet of nasi lemak was a quarter of a sen.

But Singapore, the newspaper said, had stuck to the letter of the law by maintaining that Malaysia had lost its right to a review of the price tag as it had failed to do so within the prescribed 25-year period contained in the agreement.

In an aside, it stated that Singapore was sticking to its guns despite the fact that the agreement was signed between two neighbours in a spirit of friendship. "It is clear that the spirit of friendship and neighbourliness is no more," it lamented.

The flip side of the coin, Berita Harian said, was Malaysia's amicable decision to leave the Woodlands naval base in Singapore without being paid a single sen in compensation after the republic raised the rates for the land on which it was located. And this was after Malaysia had spent millions in developing the base, it added.

Utusan Malaysia's Awang Sulung, in his Bisik Bisik column, meanwhile, entered the fray in the debate on whether Perlis should have allowed men

to marry a second wife without the green light from the first wife. In his usual light-hearted manner, he spoke of a recent telephone conversation with Women and Family Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil on the matter.

The columnist said that it was mostly a one-way conversation with him on the listening end and he appreciated Shahrizat's position. For the record, Shahrizat is one of the most passionate defenders of the rights of first wives.

His piece ended with advice to all involved in the debate on polygamy among Muslims not to aggravate the matter.

For the record, Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim has been the target of criticism from many since announcing the decision by religious department officials in his State.

Meanwhile, the Chinese newspapers were busy with the resignation of the Malaysian Chinese School Teachers Association (Jia Zong) vice-president, Loot Ting Yee. Loot was quoted by Sin Chew Daily and Nanyang Siang Pau on Tuesday as saying that he was quitting the scene over the state of affairs in the field of Chinese education.