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Singapore proposal rejected (HL)

Abdul Razak Ahmad

LANGKAWI, Sat. - Malaysia has rejected Singapore's proposal for Brussels as the venue to sign the Special Agreement to refer the Pulau Batu Puteh dispute to the International Court of Justice.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that he could not understand why Singapore chose such a faraway venue.

"We agree (to sign the agreement) but why should it be done in Brussels? Let's do it here," he said.

The Prime Minister, who was commenting on Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar's statement that the Singapore Foreign Ministry yesterday had suggested the agreement be signed on the sidelines of the Asean-European Union meeting in Brussels on Jan 27-28, did not say where "here" meant.

Dr Mahathir said this at the Langkawi International Airport after his private visit to this island.

On whether Malaysia would refuse to sign the agreement if the Singaporeans insisted on Brussels as the venue, Dr Mahathir repeated: "Do it here. Why in Brussels?"

Syed Hamid had questioned why Singapore proposed Brussels when the two countries are neighbours.

The dispute over Pulau Batu Puteh arose in 1979 and Malaysia and Singapore agreed in 1998 on the text of the Special Agreement to refer the matter to the ICJ.

Syed Hamid had said he only heard about the proposal on the date and venue for the signing of the agreement from media reports, and that he only received a note on the matter from Singapore yesterday.

Asked to confirm whether the island republic had indeed made a formal proposal on the date and venue for the signing of the agreement, Dr Mahathir said: "Yes, but it (the proposal) has not been made in writing. They merely conveyed it verbally to our people.

"There is no direct communication on this between the Foreign Ministers."

On whether Malaysia agreed to the date proposed by Singapore - Jan 27 or Jan 28 - Dr Mahathir said the matter was open for discussion.