

11/10/2003

Singapore continues reclamation works, plays down Malaysia's concern

Carol Murugiah; Jason Gerald

JOHOR BARU, Fri. - Singapore is carrying on with its reclamation works along the Tebrau Straits as scheduled although Malaysia feels it is better that the republic stop the exercise now.

Singapore's National Development Minister Mah Bow Tan has been quoted as saying that the reclamation was to ensure that its mainland projects such as the mass rapid transit (MRT) tunnel construction works were not derailed.

Yesterday, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said Malaysia felt it was best for Singapore to stop work, for if they continued the reclamation exercise, and the group of independent experts find any adverse impact, more work would need to be carried out to undo the damage.

On Wednesday, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (IT-LOS) had, short of ordering a total suspension of Singapore's reclamation works, directed the republic not to conduct its reclamation in ways that would cause irreparable prejudice to Malaysia's rights or serious harm to the marine environment.

The tribunal also ordered Singapore to subject its reclamation works to a group of independent experts who would study its effects and propose appropriate measures to deal with any adverse impact.

The order was read by tribunal president L. Dolliver M. Nelson. Also on the bench were all 21 permanent judges of the tribunal, and the two ad hoc judges appointed by Malaysia and Singapore.

The tribunal ordered both countries to cooperate in promptly setting up the group of experts and jointly agree on the terms of reference of the study, which should be completed within a year. The study by the experts was a Malaysian proposal.

Mah, quoted by the republic's Today daily, said that had the stop-work order been issued by the ITLOS in Hamburg, even construction works on mainland Singapore would have been affected.

He said an area south of Singapore's Pulau Tekong, called "Area D", was being used by contractors to deposit excess soil from mainland projects such as the Deep Tunnel Sewerage System and MRT tunnel construction.

"Hence, any stoppage of work in the area would also affect construction works in main-land Singapore."

Mah, however, had played down the threat of pollution in the area, saying the risks were minimised with the construction of a sheet pile barrier along the perimeter of the area.

In Kuala Lumpur, Abdullah said today that Wisma Putra would sit down and decide on the setting up of the group of independent experts to monitor Singapore's reclamation works in the Straits of Johor immediately after the Organisation of the Islamic Conference Summit.

"I am sure immediately after OIC Wisma Putra officials would be able to decide on the matter," he said after launching an illustrated coffee-table book called Mahathir: 22 Years, 22 Voices here.