

15/02/2003

PM to Singapore: Happy Valentine, we'll supply water till end of time

Firdaus Abdullah; Shahrum Sayuthi

JOHOR BARU, Fri. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad extended Valentine greetings to Singaporeans today, and urged them to visit Malaysia as good neighbours. "We are neighbours, and quite like brothers and sisters ... let me wish you Happy Valentine's Day," the Prime Minister said.

Assuring Singaporeans that the Government would not resort to imposing entry levies (unlike Singapore which charges RM60 per entry per car) just because a huge number of Singaporeans crossed the Causeway everyday, Dr Mahathir said Singaporeans were free to visit Malaysia without any feeling of animosity.

"They can come and enjoy the food here, we provide them with breathing space because we understand the cramped situation in Singapore.

"Being an island of similar size as Langkawi (which has a population of only 70,000 compared to Singapore's four million), we understand their predicament," Dr Mahathir said.

"That is why we are replacing the Causeway with an expanded and much easier entry infrastructure ... otherwise we might just replace the Causeway with a normal bridge.

"You can come and eat mee rebus Johor here.

"We have no problems with that.

"I'm just joking, when you meet our Singaporean friends tell them not to take the Malaysian Prime Minister very seriously; he always says things but he has a good heart," Dr Mahathir said in his speech when officiating at the ground-breaking ceremony of the Gerbang Selatan Bersepadu project.

Dr Mahathir was accompanied by his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. Also present were Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, Ministers and senior federal and state dignitaries.

Dr Mahathir reiterated that the Government was not in any way trying to cut ties with Singapore and its people.

"We do not want to break ties with Singapore, they are our brothers and sisters, our relatives; it is just that they live on the other side of the Johor Straits. They are not alien to us and we love them.

"We want Singaporeans to come here, we are not in any way angry with them. Welcome, Singaporeans!" the Prime Minister said.

The project involves the construction of a new Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) complex and an elevated 31.5-kilometre bridge to replace the Causeway.

Gerbang Perdana is 60 per cent owned by Merong Mahawangsa Sdn Bhd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Ibex Corp Amalgamated, 20 per cent owned by Diversified Resources Bhd and 20 per cent owned by Transwater Corp Bhd's Detik Nagasari Sdn Bhd.

The entire project is expected to cost between RM1.5 billion and RM2 billion.

Dr Mahathir said there were 10 million Singaporean arrivals in Johor and other parts of the country last year.

He said it looked weird that the construction of the new elevated bridge to replace the Causeway would only be confined to the Malaysian side, while the old structure on Singapore's side would remain as it is.

"It is not that we are not co-operative. Actually I had spoken to (Singapore Senior Minister) Lee Kuan Yew at our private meeting when he came to see me and he seemed very pleased with the idea.

"I gave him the map, plan and the design of the proposed elevated

bridge. But later he wrote to me and mentioned again during his following four-eyed meeting with me that even though he was keen to have the elevated bridge constructed, (Prime Minister) Goh Chok Tong was opposed to the idea because the Causeway was nostalgic to him.

"This was in a four-eyed meeting between us. Normally I don't reveal such meetings ... no one knows until today but I have to tell the truth today because even my letters have been published. So I'll have to set the record straight so that people don't blame us about not co-operating with Singapore.

"Initially I was happy (based on Lee's initial response), thinking that we could co-operate and build the bridge but according to Lee Kuan Yew, his Prime Minister was nostalgic about the Causeway, so he suggested that we should start the project after Goh leaves office," Dr Mahathir said.

Stressing that Malaysia had more reasons to build an expanded elevated bridge sooner rather than to wait for "nostalgic" feelings to subside, he said Kuala Lumpur was forced to go ahead with the project on its own, and confined to its territory.

"The volume of traffic had increased significantly and we cannot wait until Goh Chok Tong retires. This is the exact case and Malaysia should not be blamed in any way for this situation," he said, adding that Kuala Lumpur had no ill intentions but had to ensure that certain factors were in the best interest of the nation, and the people of Johor in particular.

Dr Mahathir said that Malaysia respected Singapore as an independent nation and a friend, and was willing to be a good neighbour provided the gesture worked both ways.

"We have no intentions of going to war with you, we can't afford a war with you unless you go to war with us. We are not aggressive or belligerent, there is no need for PAP Youth to talk about war because we are not for war, we are friendly people who welcome Singaporeans here ... with permission.

"Malaysia hates war, that's why now we have the Peace Malaysia initiative, Malaysia is against war anywhere that maybe, we don't like Iraq to be attacked, we don't agree in any nation being attacked ... so obviously we don't like anyone attacking us," Dr Mahathir warned.

He reiterated that no one should think that war was a solution to problems faced by "neighbours from a single family" like Malaysia and Singapore as both sides would only face destruction.

"All of us will be destroyed if they decide to launch rockets or drop bombs on the pretext of securing water supply to Singapore," he said.

The Prime Minister reassured Singaporeans that Malaysia would supply water to them until the end of the world.

"But we need not continue to supply raw water because we too have learned how to treat the water; we will supply this treated water to Singapore until kiamat (end of time). The people of Singapore need not be unduly worried over this because we have sufficient water, just pay the appropriate rate and you'll get sufficient water," he said.

Speaking at a Press conference later, Dr Mahathir said that the existing problems with the island republic could be resolved amicably only if goodwill prevailed on both sides.

Asked about Lee's reference to Goh's nostalgic "ties" with the Causeway as a reason not to proceed with the elevated bridge project, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't question people's sincerity, must be because they are sincere (that) they love the Causeway, that's why they want to retain the Causeway.

"But we are pragmatic people. Malaysians have always been pragmatic, we need to build a new bridge, we need to let the water flow through the Straits, we need to have boats passing through and because of that we have

to remove the Causeway and spend money to build the new bridge."