

21/07/2003

Three sen to tip the balance

THREE sen for a 20-page booklet? That's ridiculously cheap, an unbelievable bargain. This is exactly the point the National Economic Action Council is making by selling the booklet, *Water: The Singapore-Malaysia Dispute - The Facts*, at this rock-bottom price, the same price Singapore is paying for every 1,000 gallons of water it gets from Malaysia under an agreement made more than 40 years ago.

When the NEAC began publishing a series of advertisements in newspapers, it promised such a booklet. The aim of the "media blitz" is simple - to provide a fitting riposte to Singapore's version of events in a booklet with the mocking title, *Water talks? If only it could*.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has despaired of seeing any likelihood of the dispute being resolved before he steps down in October. Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who takes over when Dr Mahathir retires, says Malaysia has been too soft on the issue, to its detriment and Singapore's continuing profit.

The two countries have taken opposing positions. Malaysia is saying three sen is no longer a fair price and that this must be reviewed, a fact acknowledged by our thirsty neighbour across the Causeway.

Singapore, however, has dallied, contending that the price should have been renegotiated in 1986 and 1987, and since this was not done, Malaysia has weakened its right to a revision. Kuala Lumpur's subsequent moves to seek a new price have been disparaged as "old and tired" and "moving the goalposts".

The booklet, like the advertisements, is intended to show that Singapore's scornful responses do not make Malaysia's position any less valid. Even though a frosty reception can be expected in Singapore, it is a price that Malaysia is prepared to pay for standing up to what it believes is right.

When Singapore crossed the line in diplomatic decorum by making public top-level correspondence on the matter and issuing its own hype to embarrass Malaysia and lower its standing in international public opinion, Malaysia was left with no choice but to put on public record its own stand on the matter; KL wants a fair price for its H2O, period.