

Water-supply talks 'still on hold'
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Yoges Palaniappan

The government has yet to decide whether or not to resume negotiations over two Water Supply Agreements with Singapore, the Dewan Rakyat was told today.

Parliamentary secretary to the foreign affairs ministry Ahmad Shabery Cheek said the agreements signed in 1961 and 1962 will expire in 2011 and 2061 respectively.

While attempts have been made since 1990 to review the terms of the agreements, these efforts have ended in a deadlock to date, he said in reply to Md Alwi Che Ahmad (BN-Ketereh).

The backbencher had asked whether the government would review the agreements since Singapore has taken steps to reduce dependence by developing resources like Newater, while Johor does no longer requires treated water from Singapore.

"The government is, however, considering the best way to reach agreement by either referring the matter for arbitration or resuming negotiations," Ahmad said during the Question session.

"Since this is packaged with other issues that have caused an emotional strain between the two countries, we've put the negotiations on hold for the time being."

The discussions have been complicated by failure of both governments to agree on such contentious issues as the building of a bridge to replace the causeway, use of Malaysian air space by Singapore's air force and sale of sand, which have been bundled with the water pact.

Ahmad said the agreement on water supply should be viewed separately from issues of security between the two countries in order to prevent emotional responses.

"The water supply agreement was signed in the 1960s when Singapore was (still) part of Malaysia, so it should be viewed in a historical context and not in terms of security," he said.

When Singapore's separation in 1965, he said the issue became subject to "hydro-politics - that's when we started to see the issue as something that is related to safety and security".

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