

Saifuddin takes aim at S'pore's 'below the belt' remarks on water deal

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PARLIAMENT | Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah today took aim at his Singaporean counterpart over the latter's "below the belt" and "reckless" comments on Malaysia's bid to review the water pact between the two countries.

Saifuddin said he had been taken by surprise at Vivian Balakrishnan's statement, allegedly made in the Singaporean Parliament on March 1, which questioned Malaysia's right to review the 1962 Water Agreement.

This was especially as both countries had initiated negotiations on the agreement, with attorney-general Tommy Thomas having met his Singapore counterpart for the first round of talks.

"My officers and I have arranged that we move onto the second phase of discussions, that is to look at the question of cost modality, time frame and other related matters which were attainable.

"That is why I was very surprised that Singapore's foreign minister recently

recklessly criticised our act to review this agreement during his speech in Parliament,” he said.

Saifuddin was addressing a question by Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar (GPS-Santubong) on the ongoing negotiations with the republic.

Wan Junaidi had asked the minister to outline the terms of reference of the bilateral discussions, and if these were agreed to by both countries.

He also questioned if there were any early indications given by Singapore over the talks.

Saifuddin stated that Balakrishnan (above) was wrong in claiming that Malaysia did not honour the agreement and could not review it after 25 years.

“Clause 14 of the agreement stresses that it shall be subject to review after the expiry of 25 years, not at (during) the 25 years.

“So I don’t understand the English the foreign minister (Balakrishnan) is using to make that interpretation. We are following the agreement, that is why we said we can review it after 25 years of the deal being signed.

“The foreign minister also insinuated, accused us of having governance issues...

such nasty accusations are deemed 'hitting below the belt'," he told the Dewan Rakyat today.

Balakrishnan was also alleged to have claimed that Singapore was better than Malaysia, in that it provided subsidies to its neighbour on water.

Under the existing deal, Johor purchases treated water from Singapore at 50 sen per 1,000 gallons.

M'sia sells cheap, 'buys expensive'

Balakrishnan's purported comments came after Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad criticised the agreement, saying that Singapore is purchasing untreated water from Malaysia at the "ridiculously low" price of three sen per 1,000 gallons.

Singapore is allowed to draw up to 250 million gallons of raw water a day from Johor.

Mahathir also noted that Johor must be smart in fighting for its rights when facing Singapore, especially when it came to the sale of water.

In the Dewan Rakyat today, Wan Junaidi questioned what subsidies are accorded

to Singapore in the sale of water.

Saifuddin replied that Malaysia has given Singapore subsidies worth an estimated RM42 million a year, or RM2.4 billion to date.

"Or you can count this as a minimum of RM100,000 a day, if calculated from the time the agreement started to now."

"It's true as you (Wan Junaidi) said, we sell (water) at such a cheap price, but we buy it at an expensive price."

In a statement later today on the same issue, Saifuddin also countered Singapore's argument that it made significant investments to build and operate the Linggiu Dam, which it said benefited Johor.

He said the purpose of the dam is to secure Singapore's interests by enabling it to extract 250 million gallons of raw water per day from Sungai Johor in accordance with the 1962 pact.

"The size of the investment is minuscule compared to the profit gained by Singapore by purchasing raw water at a very low price.

"In addition, Singapore also benefited directly from Malaysian investments, such

as the construction of the Sungai Johor barrage that cost millions of ringgit.

“This does not include other costs borne by the Malaysian government to ensure that water supplies in Sungai Johor are adequate,” his statement read.

In Parliament, Siti Zailah Mohd Yusoff (PAS-Rantau Panjang) then questioned the minister on the measures Malaysia would take should Singapore insist on not negotiating.

Saifuddin stated that Putrajaya would work with the Johor government, as well as the Water, Land and Natural Resources Ministry, to create a state of “zero dependency” on treated water from Singapore.

He added the government could also take the matter for international arbitration if necessary.

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