

Abdullah keen to resolve outstanding issues

NST-15/5/2007

SINGAPORE: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has called for a resumption of talks to resolve the outstanding issues between Malaysia and Singapore.

"There are some political issues. They are sensitive and they need to be resolved. I have already informed the foreign minister to begin negotiations," he told *The Straits Times* yesterday.

Abdullah said, however, that he did not want to set any milestone on when the issues should be resolved.

"If the discussions are sincere and if they can be conducted in an atmosphere of understanding, it is good for both countries and they (the issues) can be resolved without having to set a timeframe."

Abdullah said he believed relations with Singapore had improved.

"It can be seen from the economic ties. Interactions have been very good."

On the retreat between him and his Singapore counterpart, Lee Hsien Loong, in Langkawi, Abdullah said he would go with an open mind.

On whether the Malaysian government was still keen on a fast train to Singapore, Abdullah said the idea was good.

"But there are two tests it must pass. First, it is a private-financing initiative project, which means government assistance or subsidy will be minimal. We will help facilitate the project but not finance it."

Second, Abdullah said, the im-

pact of the project on other sectors such as highways and airports should be looked into.

On how vital was Singapore's role to the Iskandar Development Region in Johor, Abdullah said Singaporean investors could take part in the project, which is a 2,200sq km area earmarked as the new growth corridor.

"In fact, private investment is important to its success, so we welcome all investors equally."

Abdullah was also asked on the "sense of disconnect between the government's assertion of a feel-good buzz" and grouses among citizens about soaring prices, stagnant wages and increasing strains in ethnic relations.

Abdullah said: "I recognise that fixed-income earners, especially

those living in the urban areas, are the ones who feel the pinch the most. We are already doing what we can to help them.

"Already, there are 21 price-controlled items on the essential goods' list. We are looking to increase civil servants' salaries but, even there, we must be realistic and see what we can afford."

On ethnic relations, he said: "We have frank discussions on these issues to reduce the tension and allow us to resolve the problems. Problems only arise when discussions are tainted by political motivations."

The prime minister was also asked whether there would be a snap election in the next 12 months, to which he replied: "I have not decided." —Bernama