

Efforts made to resolve 'inherited issues'

NST- 16/5/2007.

LANGKAWI: Singapore has admitted that bilateral problems with Malaysia were not easy to resolve as leaders of both countries had inherited them from their predecessors.

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, however, said the outstanding problems must be resolved at some point.

"In my case, (the inherited problems were from) two of my predecessors," he said, referring to former premiers Goh Chok Tong and his father Lee Kuan Yew.

He said the current leaders now had no choice but to deal with the problems in a way which would be acceptable to both sides.

Lee added that resolving the problems must not affect the two countries' cordial relations.

"We have many interests. These are specific issues which have to be tackled.

"Let's tackle them in a way which is completely acceptable," he said at a joint press conference

with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi here yesterday.

Both leaders spoke to the press after a two-hour informal breakfast together and a short meeting with delegation members from both countries at the Four Seasons Hotel here.

The leaders continued their informal discussions during lunch and a get-together on board Star Cruises' *Megastar Aries*.

While relations between the two countries have improved significantly in the last two years, after decades of suspicion, hiccups continued to occur from time to time over issues such as the proposal to build a bridge across the Johor Strait, the alleged violation of air space and a territorial dispute over Pulau Batu Putih, an island near Johor which Singapore calls Pedra Blanca.

Lee took Pulau Batu Putih as an example of how both countries could resolve outstanding issues.

"It's on the way to being resolved now. Both countries agreed to put it before the International Court of Justice. It is being adjudicated and, in due course, there will be a hearing; I think it's in November.

"A judgment will be delivered, maybe next year. And whichever way the judgment goes, Singapore will accept it. Malaysia will accept it. We will move on from there."

For Lee, that's one possible model for both countries to deal with other issues as well.

Stating that bilateral relations have been good, the Singapore premier said substantive co-operation had improved in areas such as investment, business, tourism and environmental efforts.

"We ought to build this positive progress to a new depth. We should also see what new things we can co-operate on. We need to build a win-win relationship that would become something significant," he said.

Abdullah, who was asked later whether the issue of the bridge and price of raw water sold to Singapore were discussed, said: "Those are old issues. We don't want to be bogged down by these issues. We will resolve them, the issues that are urgent enough for us to decide on."

He said his Singapore counterpart had also invited him for a similar retreat in the republic to bring the relationship even closer.

Lee later confirmed that Abdullah had accepted his invitation.

The two leaders also discussed the role of their countries in ensuring that the Asean Charter promotes democracy, human rights, transparency and good governance in the region.

Both leaders have expressed hope that the Charter would be signed at the Asean Summit in Singapore this November, endorsing both countries' commitment to the aims of the regional grouping.