

New chapter in S'pore-Malaysia ties

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SINGAPORE: To many observers, the recent retreat attended by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his Singapore counterpart Lee Hsien Loong in Langkawi has opened up a new chapter in bilateral relations.

After the talks, the two leaders said they had agreed to form a joint ministerial committee to oversee cooperation in the Iskandar Development Region (IDR), a multi-sectoral project on a 2,217 sq km area in south Johor, bordering Singapore.

Lee spoke of the need for both countries to work on bringing bilateral relations to a new level.

As for the unresolved issues between Malaysia and Singapore, Lee admitted they were difficult ones to resolve but said they must be tackled in a manner that was acceptable to both countries.

Analysts described the outcome of the meeting in positive terms. To former Singapore high commissioner to Malaysia K. Kesavapany, the meeting "broke new ground in dealing with bilateral issues".

"Instead of harking back to old issues that bedevilled ties till 2003 when Abdullah became prime minister, the two

leaders decided to look ahead and focus on areas in which the two countries could cooperate," he wrote in *The Straits Times* in Singapore.

"This does not mean the unresolved would be ignored, just that they will no longer be obstacles to progress," said Kesavapany, who is now director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Kesavapany, who was the high commissioner to Malaysia from 1997 to 2002 – a period he once described as the "most difficult years in the history of Singapore-Malaysia relations" – said references made at the Langkawi meeting showed bilateral disputes will now be dealt with "in a more business-like manner".

But even as both leaders explore new areas of cooperation, there remains a list of outstanding issues, among them the price of water sold to Singapore, the use of Malaysian air space by the Singapore air force, the development of KTM Bhd land in Singapore and the withdrawal of Central Provident Fund contributions by Malaysian workers in Singapore.

In 2011, the 1961 water agreement would expire. Having made progress with

alternative sources of water such as Newater and desalination of sea water, Singapore has indicated that it would let the agreement lapse.

By 2061, another agreement, the 1962 water agreement, will expire. According to Singapore's Public Utilities Board, by then the city-state "can be totally self-sufficient, if there is no new water agreement with Malaysia".

There is still the issue of a new bridge to replace the 82-year-old Johor Causeway. Having scrapped the project slightly over a year ago, Malaysia is reportedly keen to revive the proposal.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar expressed Malaysia's interest to start fresh negotiations on the bridge with Singapore.

"The bridge is important because I think we want to give a different face to the southern gate to Malaysia. We are very happy to be integrated together on the (Singapore's) MRT (mass rapid transit), and it will serve well both sides, Singapore as well as the internal IDR," he said in a *Channel News Asia* report. – Bernama