

'Syed Hamid gave PM bad advice'

DR M'S EX-AIDE CALLS ON FOREIGN MINISTER TO STEP DOWN

by **Husna Yusop**
newsdesk@thesundaily.com

KUALA LUMPUR: A former aide to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday called on Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar to resign as he had "wrongly advised" the prime minister, resulting in the cabinet's decision to scrap the bridge to Singapore.

Mahathir's former political secretary, lawyer Matthias Chang, said the media have not been fair by portraying the former premier as trying to interfere with the present administration. He also said Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi should not be blamed for the decision on the bridge.

"Abdullah has done no wrong but his advisers, especially Syed Hamid as the chief negotiator, have failed in their duties. They did not give the best advice to him," he said, adding the whole episode is "a crying shame".

Chang said he called for a press conference as he felt that being a Malaysian citizen who

has full knowledge about the whole issue, he had to stand up and speak the truth.

He said there was no legal implication to the construction of a new bridge to replace the causeway.

He said the then Singapore prime minister Goh Chok Tong had in 2002 agreed to Malaysia's plan to build the

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bridge and said the causeway could be demolished after 2007.

"Goh wants the causeway to be knocked down after 2007. We are now in 2006. So, next year. So where is this legal impediment? The water issue, the pipe must be rebuilt, under the ground, under the sea, whatever.

"But once the causeway is knocked down, of course the pipe root would be idle. It is not

a problem. There is no legal impediment," he said at his legal firm, stressing he is not speaking for Mahathir who had on Monday said the government made a mistake by scrapping the bridge project.

Chang said he was tasked by Mahathir to review all negotiation strategies between Malaysia and Singapore and had come up with 14 volumes of related documents.

The documents were submitted to several groups including Wisma Putra, (then law minister) Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim, the Attorney-General's Office, the Malaysian ambassador to Singapore and the Queen's Counsel engaged by Malaysia for the water talks.

In 2003, Singapore's Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts published a book titled *Water Talks? If Only It Could*, compiling all documents about the negotiations.

Included in the book was a letter from Goh, dated April 11, 2002, telling Mahathir he agreed on the bridge, but noted his favour for a full bridge to replace the causeway.

He had also written in the letter that if Malaysia wished to proceed with the bridge immediately and to replace its part of the causeway, he would

still accept it although he thought it was not ideal.

There was also another letter from Goh to Mahathir, dated Oct 14, 2002, agreeing with Malaysia to discontinue the package approach and deal with the water issue separately as "the trade-offs are no longer possible".

On the sand and airspace issues, Chang said he did not know when or how they had come about because the questions had never been raised before Mahathir retired in October 2003.

Past news reports had been conflicting on whether the bridge was part of a package of other issues to be addressed by Malaysia and Singapore.

Reports in 2003, quoting Mahathir and Syed Hamid, said the bridge had never been part of a package deal, contrary to Singapore's claim.

The package deal was supposed to include the use of Malaysian air space by the Singapore air force, the status of Keretapi Tanah Melayu's land in the republic and Malaysian workers' savings in the Singapore Central Provident Fund. Water supply was initially part of the package but it was later removed to be negotiated separately.

It has been reported that when the water supply issue was removed from the package deal, Singapore decided it was not in favour of the bridge.



Chang speaks to the press at his legal firm.

The Sun - 19/4/2006