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Why crooked bridge project was aborted

The New Straits Times understands that the Government will make public in full some of these documents today.

KUALA LUMPUR: The Government has declassified several confidential documents and extracts to allow Malaysians to understand why the bridge project to Singapore was aborted.

In so doing, it seeks to set the record straight on a string of allegations raised by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, namely that:

- The Singapore Government had accepted Malaysia's proposal to build a half-bridge.
- The bridge was not part of the package of outstanding bilateral issues.
- The Malaysian Government was "half-past-six" and "lacked guts" by not going ahead with the crooked bridge project.
- Malaysia had put the issue of selling sand and allowing the Republic of Singapore Air Force to use its airspace on the negotiating table.

This was only the second time in recent history that information protected by the Official Secrets Act has been cleared for public consumption, a sign of the Government's seriousness in wanting the people to have the full facts so as to appreciate why the Government decided to abort the project.

In the package of documents released is correspondence between Dr Mahathir and two of Singapore's former prime ministers, Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong.

Also made public are extracts of the record of the meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Goh in Kuala Lumpur in March 2005.

Trawling through the documents, it is easy to establish several facts.

Fact Number One: Discussions with Singapore on the airspace issue were not new and were not mooted by the current Government under Abdullah.

Dr Mahathir himself included this issue as a trade-off and as part of the package of issues to be resolved with Singapore during negotiations from 1998 to 2002.



An artist's impression of the crooked bridge.

Package of documents made public in the interest of Malaysia

This was evident in Dr Mahathir's letter to Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew on March 4, 2002. The same issue was raised by Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong during a meeting with Abdullah on March 1, 2005. This nullifies the suggestion by Dr Mahathir that it was the present administration that offered RSAF jets use of Malaysian airspace.

Fact Number Two: The sale of sand to Singapore was raised by Singapore at a meeting between Abdullah and Goh on March 1, 2005. This nullifies the argument that the Malaysian Government had put the issue of sand on the negotiating table.

Fact Number Three: Comprehensive advice from the Attorney-General's Chambers showed that Malaysia could not proceed to build a bridge unilaterally because of legal implications.

In particular, Malaysia had

obligations under the Johor-Singapore water agreements 1961 and 1962, the Wayleave Agreements, and the Separation Agreement 1965.

A main obstacle was the Public Utilities Board's ownership of the water pipeline on the Causeway.

The A-G's Chambers said that under the 1961 and 1962 Johor-Singapore Water Agreements, "Malaysia is required to obtain approval of the PUB in relation to the alteration of water pipelines as a result of the construction of a full straight bridge or a scenic bridge".

These agreements were guaranteed under the 1965 Separation Agreement, and take precedence over the Wayleave Agreements. These facts nullify the allegation that the water pipes could be relocated unilaterally on giving six months' notice to Singapore.

Taking into consideration these facts, the present Government had to make the firm decision to reject Singapore's quid-pro-quo proposal on sand and airspace, it would have compromised Malaysia's sovereignty.

It had to make the political decision to abort the bridge project as this was consistent with the sentiments of Malaysians and the interest of Malaysia.

Concluding, the Foreign Ministry said the issue boiled down to one simple fact: Malaysia wanted the bridge and Singapore did not.

"The straight bridge proposed by Malaysia would have been a symbol of friendship and would have benefited both countries. Nevertheless, the responsibility for achieving this aim does not lie with Malaysia alone," said the ministry in a statement to Bernama.