

International court rules on disputed Southeast Asian islands

Malaysia and Singapore have accepted the verdict of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), The Hague, on a 28-year old dispute over control of three islands in the Straits of Singapore, and decided to 'move on'.

The Malaysian fishermen are already preparing to go fishing on one of these islands after several years, Malaysian media reported.

In Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said his nation fully accepted the judgement. 'I am pleased with the result. We fully accept the judgement of the ICJ,' he said in a statement

Although Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said he was 'sad' about the verdict due to which Malaysia loses control of an island that it had claimed in the 1960s, his Foreign Minister Rais Yatim described the ruling as 'a win-win situation' for Malaysia and Singapore.

Yatim said he had spoken with Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Prof S. Jayakumar and ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh after the decision and they were committed in wanting both countries to move on.

'We won half and Singapore won half. So I say it's a win-win situation and nothing less,' he told journalists after the ICJ delivered its verdict, The Star said Saturday.

The ICJ ruled on Pulau Batu Puteh, Middle Rocks and South Ledge islands that were disputed by both the Southeast Asian nations.

Yatim said Malaysia's loss of Pulau Batu Puteh was not due to the weakness of its arguments, but due to lack of activity there for over 100 years and the letter written by the Johor acting state secretary to Singapore in 1953.

While Singapore got sovereignty over the island, he said the court recognised the historical significance of the Johor Sultan's claim over the atoll as well as Middle Rocks and South Ledge.

'The court took into account the fact that for over 100 years from 1850 to 1953, we did nothing to invoke our rights to the island,' he said.

He said although Malaysia got Middle Rocks, which was smaller than Pulau Batu Puteh, their adjacent positions meant that neither country could conduct any work without consulting each other.

'So it's back to status quo,' he said, although jurisdictionally and sovereign-wise, one belonged to Malaysia and the other to Singapore.

A beleaguered Badawi, politically weakened by the March election and facing a revolt from his predecessor Mahathir Mohamad, said it was significant that the decision was made at the international level.

'There will be people who will be emotional, especially in Johor. I can understand this. But the important thing is we have done this through the available legal channel,' he told Malaysian

journalists accompanying him on his working visit to Japan.

A report from Pengerang in Johor said that for the first time in decades, Malaysian fishermen will be able to fish off Middle Rocks, which are just 0.6 nautical miles south of Pulau Batu Puteh, or Pedra Branca, which now officially belongs to Singapore.

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