

Malaysia summons Singapore envoy

Published: 26 Nov 2013 at 13.12 Online news: Security

Malaysia said it will summon Singapore's high commissioner on Tuesday to respond to allegations of spying which risk damaging improved political and business ties between the Southeast Asian neighbours.

Indonesia and Malaysia have been key targets for Australian and United States intelligence cooperation since the 1970s, facilitated in part by Singapore, the Sydney Morning Herald reported on Monday, citing documents leaked by former US intelligence contractor Edward Snowden.

Malaysia's foreign ministry said it was "extremely concerned" and had already acted against earlier claims of espionage by the US and Australia.

"It cannot be overemphasised that spying against a good friend and neighbour is unacceptable and goes against the true spirit of and commitment to good neighbourly relations," Anifah Aman, Malaysia's foreign minister, said in an e-mailed statement late Monday. "If those allegations are eventually proven, it is certainly a serious matter."

Relations between Singapore and Malaysia have improved after half a century of tensions over issues such as water supply and ownership of a railway station, with the neighbours cooperating on real estate projects on both sides of the border and seeking to improve transport links. Malaysia is a party to the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade talks with Singapore and the US.

'Accepted Norms'

Ong Keng Yong, Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia, confirmed by phone on Tuesday that he had been called to meet senior foreign ministry officials on Tuesday morning.

The Sydney Morning Herald cited a map from the US National Security Agency and leaked by Snowden showing Singapore forming part of a global network where cable traffic could be tapped. Michele Batchelor, a spokeswoman for Singapore Telecommunications Ltd, declined to comment. SingTel is 52%-owned by Temasek Holdings Pte, Singapore's state-owned investment company.

Malaysia said in a statement last month it had sought clarification from US Ambassador Joseph Y Yun following allegations by Snowden that the US had 90 electronic surveillance facilities worldwide, including at its Kuala Lumpur embassy. Yun said he had received instructions to review the scope of surveillance, it said, without giving details.

"I don't think we should be surprised that these sort of diplomatic statecraft are being practiced, even by the closest of neighbours," said Eugene Tan, an associate law professor at Singapore Management University. "The question now is whether some of the intelligence gathering may have crossed accepted norms."

Indonesia Friction

The reports could also spur friction between Singapore and Indonesia, Tan said. "The Indonesians would probably be concerned whether the information is also being shared with Singapore intelligence, besides the Australians."

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott has written to Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono as he seeks to repair relations after claims the phones of Indonesia's leaders were tapped.

Yudhoyono halted cooperation with the Abbott government on asylum seekers and military operations after withdrawing his ambassador from Canberra last week, as tensions between the two countries reached their highest point in 14 years.

Yudhoyono's spokesman Teuku Faizasyah did not respond to a mobile phone message seeking comment.