DO YOU KNOW?

Solving Bilateral Dispute Diplomatically – Pedra Branca/ Pulau Batu Puteh

The dispute over ownership of the island of Pedra Branca between Singapore and Malaysia was triggered on 21 December 1979, when Malaysia published a map entitled “Territorial Waters and Continental Shelf Boundaries of Malaysia”, in which Pedra Branca was shown to be a part of Malaysia. The Singapore Government issued a formal protest in the form of a Third Party Note to Malaysia on 14 February 1980 disputing this claim.

In 1847, the British government had taken possession of the island and built a lighthouse named in memory of hydrographer James Horsburgh, who mapped waterways around Singapore. For the next 130 years, no other country had exercised or claimed jurisdiction over the island and the lighthouse was operated and maintained by Singapore.

After extended diplomatic exchanges failed to resolve this issue, Singapore and Malaysia agreed in 1989 to refer the sovereignty issue to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). However, it was not until July 2003 that a Special Agreement was signed by both countries to officially refer the case to ICJ. The oral pleadings were held at The Hague in the Netherlands in November 2007.

On 23 May 2008, the ICJ passed its verdict on the long-running dispute over the sovereign status of Pedra Branca and two neighbouring maritime outcrops, Middle Rocks and South Ledge.

The court awarded Pedra Branca/Pulau Batu Puteh to Singapore, and Middle Rocks to Malaysia. South Ledge, which is only visible at low tide, belongs to the state in the territorial waters of which it is located.