

# KL growing economic power, says US don

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By Farush Khan

PETALING JAYA, Tues. — The United States views Malaysia as a country which is becoming an important economic power in the South-east Asian region, a prominent US scholar and author, Dr John L. Esposito said today.

He said that Malaysia was now known far better than before among the people in the US.

They, he said, now know about the strong economic growth of Malaysia besides other countries like Japan and Hong Kong.

He said as a result, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, had been getting far more coverage in the West.

Esposito, who has been on occasions called to advise the US State Department on Islam in view of his profound knowledge of the religion, said he noticed there was growing awareness of Malaysia's development in the West.

"Malaysia is seen as a very independent force internationally," said Esposito, Director of the Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, Washington

D.C.

He was speaking to reporters after a public lecture on "Islam in American Foreign Policy" at Universiti Malaya organised by the university's Academic Staff Association.

Asked on the US perceptions of Dr Mahathir, he said the US realised that Dr Mahathir had been making very strong statements about the West.

"The Prime Minister has no constraints about criticising the West but at the same time feels free to criticise with regard to democracy and human rights," he said.

Asked about US reaction to such criticism, he said he believed despite this, the US was prepared to develop strong relations with South-east Asia, including Malaysia.

He said although Dr Mahathir had been strongly critical of the West and at times was seen as almost anti-West in his statements, no American leader has concluded that Dr Mahathir or Malaysia is anti-West.

Esposito said the US would be very open in its relations with Malaysia, "but again this will be based on the US overriding interest".

He said for economic and

political reasons, US would want to maintain good relationship with Malaysia.

On his over one-hour meeting with Anwar yesterday, he said, among others he sought Anwar's views on the development in Malaysia, especially economic.

He said he also asked Anwar about his perception in Malaysia-US relations as well as about his research to write two books on Malaysia and Malaysian leaders.

"I hope to come back to interview the Prime Minister and other people on the research," he said.

Esposito said he also emphasised to Anwar about his interest in promoting better ties between Georgetown University and the universities in Malaysia.

Based on the reputation of the Georgetown University and its location, he said, there was an opportunity to make Southeast Asia and Islam in this region prominently known.

Esposito is also compiling an encyclopaedia of the modern Islamic world which will include contributions from Malaysians.

The four-volume work will look into the entire Muslim world and become a major reference work for diplomats, government officials and academicians.