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LEAD Clinton-Mahathir  
CLINTON PRAISES MAHATHIR'S LEADERSHIP  
From AZMAN UJANG & SALMY HASHIM  
WASHINGTON, May 6 (Bernama) -- U.S. President Bill Clinton praised Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for his leadership and the country's "incredible accomplishments" and set the tone for stronger ties between the two countries in their first ever meeting here Friday. *overseas trip*

"I admire his leadership very much and I admire the incredible accomplishments of his nation under his leadership in the last several years," he said when replying to a question by a Malaysian journalist during a brief photo session before the start of his talks with Dr Mahathir at the Oval Office at the White House.

Clinton said he had been looking forward to meeting Dr Mahathir for a long time to establish a good relationship with him.

Malaysian journalists covering the event were permitted by White House aides to put only one question to Clinton before the closed-door meeting began. -- more

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Also present were U.S. Vice President Al Gore, Secretary of State Warren Christopher, U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia John Stern Wolf, while on the Malaysian side were former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, Malaysian Ambassador Datuk Abdul Majid Mohamed and Malaysia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Tan Sri Razali Ismail.

Describing Dr Mahathir as a responsible leader in world affairs, Clinton said he was grateful for the security partnership between Malaysia and the United States.

He was referring to the rescue of U.S. soldiers by Malaysian troops in Mogadishu, Somalia, last year. The Americans were pinned down by heavy fire from the militia of Somali warlord Gen Farah Aideed.

One Malaysian soldier was killed during the rescue operation.

Clinton also said he was very grateful for the contributions made by Malaysia to the United Nations operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Somalia.

While Malaysian journalists, White House correspondents and television cameramen waited outside the Oval office in the chilling Spring afternoon for Dr Mahathir to emerge, the warmth of the meeting inside was evident when it stretched well beyond the scheduled 45 minutes. -- more

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It lasted about 80 minutes. In the customary open air press conference for visiting leaders, Dr Mahathir described the talks, covering a wide range of international issues, as "very useful."

"We agreed on most things and I think as a result of this meeting relations between Malaysia and the U.S. would be much easier," he added.

Washington-Kuala Lumpur ties have been somewhat patchy during the later part of the Bush Administration when it opposed the Malaysian proposal for the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC).

Then U.S. Secretary of States James Baker did not help matters either when he issued a veiled threat to Japan and South Korea to dissociate themselves from EAEC.

Dr Mahathir's absence from the summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Seattle last November was largely seen as a snub to the U.S. but since then officials and the private sector of both sides have been working hard to patch up the strained ties between the world's most powerful nation and one of Asia's fastest growing economies.

But now things are looking up and Dr. Mahathir added a strong note of optimism Friday by saying that he had invited President Clinton to visit Malaysia on his way to Jakarta later this year to attend the APEC summit to be hosted by Indonesia. -- more

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"I've invited him to come to Malaysia on his way to Jakarta. I hope he'll be able to do that. He said 'Yes' but that doesn't mean that he will come, but at least he didn't say no," was how Dr Mahathir put it.

If the visit materialises it will be the first by an American president in three decades. The last to visit Malaysia was the late Lyndon Johnson in the 60s.

He said they had a long discussion on Bosnia-Herzegovina, an issue very close to Dr Mahathir's heart as seen by his intense lobbying to get the world community, the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to act decisively to stop the Serb aggression on Bosnian Muslims in a conflict which has already claimed hundreds of thousands of lives.

Dr Mahathir has even written letters to Clinton asking the U.S. to assume a leadership role in the face of U.N. and NATO impotence in resolving the three-year-old Bosnian problem.

Asked if he expected the U.S. to change its stand on Bosnia, Dr Mahathir said there was not much difference between the U.S. and Malaysia's views on the issue but the problem was their respective ability to act. -- more

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"I can't say that I have any indication of any change in the U.S. stand but I'm very glad that he listened to my views," he added.

Dr Mahathir said Clinton also sought his views on China following the ongoing uncertainty about whether the U.S. would continue to accord China the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status due to its human rights record.

"I told President Clinton that one should not apply pressure, one should try to convince by pointing out the rights and wrongs rather than try to do anything that might be interpreted as arm-twisting... and that does not apply only to China but to any country," he said.

Dr Mahathir, who is on an unofficial three-day visit, later left for St. Louis in Missouri for a brief tour of the McDonnell-Douglas aircraft manufacturing plant and discuss plans for its participation in the Malaysian aerospace industry.

From there, he flew to Bloomington in Indiana where he will stay the night, and tomorrow his wife, Datuk Seri Datin Paduka Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, will receive a honorary doctorate degree from Indiana University. -- more

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He will visit the Boeing plant in Seattle on Sunday before leaving for China to address a conference organised by the International Herald Tribune.

Meanwhile, White House Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers, said in her statement that the two leaders discussed the state of US relations with Asia and the future developments of Asia. -- Bernama

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