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Keating-Malaysia

AUSTRALIA NEEDS TO SEE MALAYSIA IN A NEW WAY, SAYS KEATING

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, Jan 12 (Bernama) -- Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating said that Australia needs to see Malaysia in "a new way" in the context of the dynamism and change which have made it Southeast Asia's fastest-growing economy.

He said Australians should not look Malaysia through "the prism of the Emergency or Confrontation or the Colombo Plan connections", but from its growth rate of nine per cent this year and an average of 8.5 per cent per year over the past seven years.

Keating, who will make his first official visit to Malaysia beginning Monday, said he hoped that Malaysians will see a modern multicultural Australia "which is not an outpost of Europe or North America, which is not trying to be Asian or American or African or anything other than what we are".

He said Kuala Lumpur should see Australia as a country that is economically strong, technologically sophisticated and endowed with resources which complement the needs of Malaysia and other rapidly developing countries of Asia.

"Future success for Australia-Malaysia relationship depends on our recognising that these changes are underway and building on them," he said in a statement to Bernama.

KL-Canberra ties were strained in 1993 when Keating described Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as a recalcitrant for not attending the first Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) informal meeting in Seattle in November the same year.

Keating said: "We can continue to do the sort of things we have been doing, but we need to do them in new ways."

He said Australia and Malaysia should take advantage of the economic and social changes in the two countries to find new things to do together.

Citing an example, Keating said both he and Dr Mahathir agreed at their meeting in Jakarta (during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation informal meeting) in 1994 that technology, including environmental technology and research will be an important new area for cooperation.

Keating said he looks forward to his trip to Malaysia next week "with a sense that few relationships between countries have such a base of goodwill as that which exists between our two countries".

Stressing that it was not simply a relationship between governments, he said it was a relationship underpinned by the level of contact and depth of friendship between the peoples of the two countries.

"It is one which is nourished and sustained by all the links which individual Malaysians and Australians have been built up over the years," he said.

The Australian Prime Minister said the ties have grown substantially as can be seen from the number of Malaysian students studying in Australia.

He said another great area of strength was in defence cooperation formalised through the Malaysia-Australia Joint Defence Programme and the Five Power Defence Arrangement.

"No one who has any contact with the military in either of our countries can doubt that close personal bonds which have grown out of these professional links," he said.

Keating said trade and investment relationship has been another key source of people-to-people contact and the Australian business community

has also been a keen supporter of the bilateral ties over the years.

"This year, Malaysia should overtake Britain to become one of Australia's 10 largest export markets," he said.

"So this is a very healthy relationship and we have a very good story to tell," he said, adding that to maintain the relationship at that level, both parties need to work on it "because, paradoxically, there are dangers in our very closeness and familiarity with each other".

Keating said: "It can make the familiar views we have of each other harder to discard when they are no longer relevant. We can get stuck with images of each other which are out of date."

He said Australia-Malaysia ties were so old that it brings with it a lot of preconceptions which could impede a clear view of each other.

"There is a strong and deep relationship between Australia and Malaysia and I hope my visit will help ensure it continues to grow and provide benefits for the peoples of both our countries," he added. -- Bernama