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Mahathir-Howard

DR M PLEASED WITH HOWARD MEETING

By: Neville D'Cruz

BRISBANE, March 29 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad flew back to Kuala Lumpur this afternoon after having a meeting of more than an hour with the new Australian Prime Minister, John Howard.

Dr Mahathir told a news conference for accompanying Malaysian journalists that he was satisfied with his meeting with Howard and his first discussions with Howard had been "positive and useful".

He said he had discussed a wide range of topics of bilateral interest and was confident that Howard was sincere in his desire and efforts to improve relationships between the two countries.

He said the issue of EAEC was brought up and Dr Mahathir said he did not expect Australia to change its position but was assured by Howard that any opposition to EAEC would not be aired in public.

Dr Mahathir said he was not so much considered about Australia as "some other countries" although he did not specify which countries.

Both leaders agreed that unwelcomed words like "barbaric" would not be used in future. However, both countries would respect each other's right to disagree while displaying mutual respect.

Dr Mahathir's otherwise successful visit was marred by a noisy demonstration outside the Singaporean-owned Beaufort Heritage Hotel. About 25 people protested against the Bakun Dam hydroelectric project which they said was damaging the environment of Sarawak.

Dr Mahathir was unperturbed when a woman posing as a journalist rushed towards him as he arrived questioning him about Bakun. Security staff stepped in and removed the offender.

A beaming Howard later addressed a large gathering of Australian and Malaysian journalists claiming the meeting with Dr Mahathir had been an outstanding success. "It was positive and cordial," he said.

Howard said he planned to work closely with leaders of the region as well as maintaining historical links with Europe and the United States.

He said both leaders agreed to have direct telephone contact with each other should any difficulty in relationship arose.

"Geographically, we have a permanent interest in this region of the world and we will work together," he said.

International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz told reporters in a door-stop interview that she had sent the Australian government a draft of a new trade agreement with Australia and it would be signed once both parties had approved it.

She hoped to sign it when she returned to Australia in early June.

Also to greet Dr Mahathir were the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade Tim Fischer, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and Education Minister Amanda Vanstone.

Datuk Najib had a brief discussion with Vanstone.

Also present were Malaysian High Commissioner Datuk Zainal Abidin Ibrahim and the new Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia William Farmer as well as the former Australian High Commissioner John Dauth.

Also to greet Dr Mahathir were two officials of The Australia Malaysia Business Council in Adelaide, Peter Yeoh, formerly of Klang, and Maha Sinnathamby, of Rantau, Negeri Sembilan. -- Bernama

NDC RM