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France-Nuclear

FRENCH FOREIGN MINISTER TO EXPLAIN FRENCH NUCLEAR TESTS

KUALA LUMPUR, March 1 (Bernama) -- French Foreign Minister Herve de Charette will explain the controversial French nuclear tests in the South Pacific during talks with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad here next week.

French Ambassador Edouard Braine said today he did not see any reason why de Charette would not raise the matter with Dr Mahathir on Monday as "there was nothing to hide."

"My President (Jacques Chirac) did not hide this in Singapore," Braine said referring to Chirac's speech during his visit to Singapore yesterday where he said that Paris was ready to sign "this very year" the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

"This is a subject of interest, not only to elaborate on the past but to see what we can do for the future. The question now is what France can do to help the nuclear disarmament in Asia," Braine said when briefing reporters on de Charette's visit at the French Embassy here.

de Charette arrives here Sunday for a three-day official visit, the first by a French Foreign Minister. He will be accompanied by his wife, Michele, several elected representatives and chairmen of three leading French companies -- Alcatel, Lyonnaise des Eaux and Alsthom.

Braine said the nuclear tests, strongly condemned by Malaysia, and "various other issues" had created a gap in bilateral relations.

France conducted its sixth and last nuclear test in the South Pacific recently.

He said de Charette's visit was aimed at building a "political conversation" to "fill the gap" and pave the way for better French-Malaysian relations.

"We have a gap and we have to see each other to discuss it... the time is now right for a change and to forge a better relationship," he said, adding that the "political conversation" was long overdue.

He said France owed a political gesture to Malaysia to explain and clear the air about the nuclear tests and other issues that had created the gap.

On trade relations, Braine said several French companies were keen to participate in the local defence, infrastructure, automotive and consumer goods industries.

The French Foreign Minister was also expected to hold talks with Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and several Cabinet ministers including Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz during his visit here.

He will make a brief stopover in Pulau Pinang on Tuesday before returning home. -- BERNAMA

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