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LEAD Mahathir-Measat

FRENCH GOVT ADVISES PM AGAINST KOUROU TRIP FOR MEASAT LAUNCH

By: Azman Ujang

PARIS, Nov 10 (Bernama) -- The French government has advised Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad not to go to Kourou in French Guiana to witness next week's launch of Malaysia's second satellite, Measat II, following student and worker protests in the territory.

Francis P. Avanzi, chief operating officer and executive vice-president of Arianespace, the European consortium which undertakes the launch, told Malaysian journalists here today that instead the French government would organise a "live" transmission of the lift-off of the satellite for the Prime Minister here.

"This is the advice of the French government communicated to us today but we are awaiting word from Dr Mahathir himself who will make the final decision whether to witness the launch in Kourou," he said at a briefing.

Dr Mahathir is currently on a visit to Ghana.

But Avanzi said the lift-off scheduled at 7.40 pm on Wednesday (6.40 am Thursday in Malaysia) would go ahead as planned.

Avanzi said according to reports from Kourou, the street protests took place in Cayenne, the capital of French Guiana, but the situation has since returned to normal.

The French government would send two ministers to Cayenne to look into the unrest said to be caused by unsatisfactory conditions in schools.

France administers the territory located on the north-eastern coast of South America which has a population of 150,000.

Avanzi said Dr Mahathir, who was scheduled to arrive at Cayenne airport on Tuesday, had been advised against making the trip because the protestors were expected to launch a general strike the next day, the same day as the launch.

"The Kourou Space Centre where the launch will take place has its own electricity and other facilities but not the hotel where the Prime Minister and other Malaysian guests will be staying in the event of the general strike.

"So the advice is for the sake of the comfort of the guests," he added.

Binariang Sdn Bhd, which owns the satellite, has invited 200 guests from Malaysia to witness the launch in Kourou, including two dozen from the media.

The media representatives scheduled to fly to Kourou today had cancelled their flight.

"But if your Prime Minister decides to go to Kourou, you will also be going along," he told the journalists.

He said the "live" telecast of the launch over RTM would also proceed as scheduled.

According to the original programme, Dr Mahathir will arrive in Cayenne on Tuesday after an overnight visit to Trinidad and Tobago in the West Indies.

On Friday, the Prime Minister is scheduled to call on French President Jacques Chirac at the Elysee Palace. -- BERNAMA

AU YBY