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Keating-talks

MAHATHIR-KEATING TALKS SET TO FURTHER BOLSTER BILATERAL TIES

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 16 (Bernama) -- Visiting Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating today described his talks with his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, as "a long talk which was very useful and fruitful".

Speaking at a news conference, Keating, who is on the second day of his three-day official visit here, said he "very much enjoyed" his visit and told Dr Mahathir that he hoped to make another extensive trip to Malaysia.

Keating said he had also extended an invitation to Dr Mahathir to visit Australia.

Asked to describe the present relationship between Australia and Malaysia, especially with his visit, he said both sides were now doing more to strengthen the relationship.

"We are trying to do things together and the fact that I am here demonstrates that is what I believe and I am certain that that is (also) what the Prime Minister (Dr Mahathir) believes," he said.

Keating also said that there was no strain in the Australia-Malaysia relationship but agreed with Dr Mahathir's statement yesterday that hiccups had occurred in bilateral ties.

Yesterday, Dr Mahathir said at a dinner he hosted for Keating that hiccups had occurred but these had not affected the substantive aspects of the relationship.

The Australian Prime Minister said hiccups occurred not only in KL-Canberra ties but also in Australia's relationship with other countries.

"All relationships have hiccups...they come and go," he added.

Keating disagreed with the view that there were more differences between Australia and Malaysia which had caused the hiccups.

While saying that the existing relationship had often been taken for granted, he reiterated that Australia and Malaysia needed a contemporary snapshot of the societies in the two countries to build a better relationship.

On his talks with Dr Mahathir, Keating said they discussed specific areas which underlined the strong KL-Canberra relationship, namely environment, science, finance, building and construction and civil aviation.

Keating said he did not discuss the proposed East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) and the first Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) to be held in Bangkok in March with Dr Mahathir.

Australia is not attending Asem and it was reported that Malaysia was the only Asean country at the last Asean Ministerial Meeting in Brunei which opposed Australia's participation in the meeting.

Keating, however, said that Australia would see how the Asem in Bangkok goes before deciding whether to attend the next Asem.

Asked on Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's statement yesterday that Asean should consider asking Australia and New Zealand to join the grouping in the future, Keating said Canberra had not been invited to become part of Asean.

He reiterated that Australia was not an Asean country and had never claimed to be an Asian nation.

"We don't see ourselves as an Asian country but what matters is that we are an integral part of the Asia Pacific economies...we are all in it and we are all integrating," he said.

Goh told the 'The Australian Financial Review' yesterday that Australia and New Zealand could one day join the seven-member Asean and that the idea was "thinkable" and one for "debate". -- Bernama