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Mahathir - Australia

DR MAHATHIR'S VISIT CAPTURES HEADLINES IN AUSSIE MEDIA

By: Neville D"Cruz

BRISBANE, March 30 (Bernama) -- Australian newspapers, television and radio gave prominence to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's historic and eagerly awaited meeting yesterday with this Australian counterpart John Howard here.

This is rare among the Australian Media which generally gives very little coverage to visiting dignitaries. Even the impressive police motorcycle escort and motorcade was unusual.

All television and radio station yesterday led off their evening news bulletins with footage and report on the much publicised visit which saw the two leaders meeting for the first time.

Most newspapers carried report of the brief but warm meeting on their front pages with the country's leading paper The Australian praising the efforts of both Prime Ministers taking the opportunity of holding informal talks so soon after the election of Howard as Prime Minister on March 2.

In its editorial today, The Australian said that although the visit was rushed, "the atmospherics of this visit has been cordial, dignified and productive".

Noting that Howard had made a good beginning to his Asian diplomacy, the paper said: "They help Mr Howard send the appropriate and necessary message that his Government is totally committed to deepening Australis's engagement with out neighbours in East Asia."

Similary he (Howard) stressed the importance of the Malaysia-Australia relationship itself, which has not only weathered storms in recent years but actually, in trade ,security co-operation and educational exchange, gone from strength to strength.

"But the Howard-Mahathir meeting's position also dealt with issues of substance, and sometimes of contention, but did so in a way which demonstrated each leaders's commitment to disagree in a civil manner."

The paper said Howard's position of neither supporting nor opposing the proposed East Asian Economic Caucus "makes good sense, although it by no means solve all problems about getting Australia included in regional structures in the future.

Although in some mood Dr Mahathir has once or twice in the past canvassed the idea of eventual Australian membership of the EAEC which would certainly be a good long-term result for Australia."

Australian newspapers also highlighted Howard saying that Dr Mahathir had told him that Australia shipbulider Transfield had a "very good change" of winning the contract to build up to 27 patrol boats for Malaysia.

The Sydney Morning Herald said that Australian diplomats were "confident that success for Transfield would show that the volatile relationship between Canberra and Kuala Lumpur had recovered from the periodic clashes or recent years and could stabilise with close security co-operation in the remainder of the decade."

The paper said Dr Mahathir's two short stopovers on the outward and homeward leg of an official visit to New Zealand were seen as a signal that Dr Mahathir wanted better ties with the Australian Government. -- Bernama

ND AAM