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Keating-visit (With Pix)

KEATING ARRIVES FOR TWO-DAY OFFICIAL VISIT

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 15 (Bernama) -- Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating arrived here today for a two-day official visit to Malaysia to cement bilateral ties which have gone through stormy periods in recent years.

Keating's trip, his first official visit, marks an important milestone in Australia-Malaysia relations, notably after the diplomatic row in 1993 when the Australian leader described Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as recalcitrant for not attending the first leaders' informal meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) in Seattle.

The Australian Prime Minister, who was accompanied by his wife Annita, a 10-member delegation and a business group, will meet Dr Mahathir tomorrow for the fourth time since he made the remark.

The two prime ministers had met on three occasions after the row -- in Bogor (Indonesia) in 1994 during the second Apec meeting, at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (Chogm) in Auckland (New Zealand) and the third Apec meeting in Osaka last year.

On hand to welcome Keating at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Subang were acting Foreign Minister Datuk Abu Hassan Omar, Deputy International Trade and Industry Minister Kerk Choo Ting, who is the minister-in-attendance, and Australian High Commissioner John Dauth.

Keating was later taken on a motorcade for the welcoming ceremony at Parliament Square.

He will then have an audience with the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Tuanku Ja'afar, at Istana Negeri Sembilan.

Later in the evening, Keating and his entourage will be hosted to a dinner by Dr Mahathir at his official residence, Seri Perdana.

Tomorrow, Keating will hold talks with Dr Mahathir at the Prime Minister's Department after which both the leaders will witness the signing of agreements and Memorandums of Understanding between the private sectors of the two countries.

Keating will also present a keynote address at the Malaysia-Australia Business Forum at Hotel Istana and receive a courtesy call from Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Economic Adviser to the Government Tun Daim Zainuddin.

A separate programme has been arranged for Puan Keating. She will meet the surgical team and patients of the cochlear implant project at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Keating will leave for Singapore on Wednesday.

Bilateral trade between the two countries grew by more than 20 per cent in 1994-95 to Aus\$3.5 billion (RM6.65 billion).

Keating, 51, was elected leader of the Australian Labour Party and Prime Minister by the Parliamentary Labour Party Caucus on Dec 19, 1991. He led the federal government to an historic fifth term victory in the March 1993 elections.

The last Australian leader to visit Malaysia was former prime minister Bob Hawke in February 1984. -- Bernama