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Keating-Visit (With Pix)

KEATING'S VISIT TO SET PACE FOR NEW RELATIONSHIP

By: E.Sivabalan

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 7 (Bernama) -- Kuala Lumpur-Canberra relations are often on the rocks but efforts from "Down Under" to mend bridges over the last two years will be capped with the visit by Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating to Malaysia later this month.

Diplomatic ties took a nosedive in 1993 when Keating called Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad "recalcitrant" for not attending the first Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) informal meeting in Seattle in November the same year.

Since then, the two prime ministers have met on three occasions -- in Bogor (Indonesia) in 1994 during the second Apec meeting, at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (Chogm) in Auckland (New Zealand) and the APEC leaders informal summit in Osaka, Japan, last year.

Keating will hold talks with Dr Mahathir again when he arrives here on Jan 15 for a two-day official visit, making it his first trip to Malaysia after becoming Prime Minister four years ago.

Although Keating did not apologise for his remark about Dr Mahathir, the Australian leader expressed regret, which was well received by Dr Mahathir who after his meeting with Keating in Bogor told reporters that the word (recalcitrant) was no more in the vocabulary.

While admitting that bilateral relations have been "rocky" in the past, Australian High Commissioner John Dauth said that it has been "very, very strong for the last two years."

"It is in better shape than it has ever been because both sides now understand the mutuality of the benefits in our relationship," he told Bernama in an interview here recently.

Dauth, who will complete his three-year tour of duty here later this month, said the "1993 uproar" was "the last problem we had and we haven't had a problem since."

"We had substantial differences between governments but (they) were solved in a very clean way and there ain't been a problem since," he said, adding that the "fault" (for the rocky relationship) was on both sides.

Relations between Malaysia and Australia took another twist when the Australian media reported in early 1994 that the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (Asis) had bribed some Malaysian opposition politicians.

Then, Keating once again earned the wrath of Malaysian leaders for his allegations that Malaysian logging companies were among those from three countries "ripping off the Solomon Islands by paying too little for valuable and limited forest products."

Dauth felt, however, that Keating's visit to Malaysia would further cement the strong ties between the two countries.

"It's something which he (Keating) wanted to do personally for some time and something that we Australians had wanted to do for a long time," he said.

But, he noted: "Everytime things seem to be getting better, something else went wrong."

Saying that he did not know the reason behind the continued "misunderstanding," Dauth agreed that to some degree, it was because "the relationship was running on its past rather than looking to its future."

He said the two governments have since realised that to reap the benefits in their relationship, they have to work hard.

"You can't just take relationships for granted... you have to invent new ways, and we have to look forward together," he added.

Dauth said that too often in the past, Australia-Malaysia relations were built on sentiments.

"There is nothing wrong with sentiments, but we also got to have a hard base... we've got to have something in the relation for both sides," he said.

Dauth also clarified that Keating's visit was not to project a good image ahead of the Australian polls sometime early this year although he agreed that it (the visit) would be an electoral asset.

He said Keating's visit was not merely a "business call," understandably so judging from the excellent track record in two-way trade which stood at between RM7 and RM8 billion.

In 1994, for example, the Foreign Investment Review Board figures showed it approved Malaysian investments of just over A\$1 billion of which less than half of it was in property, he said.

He said a number of Memoranda of Understanding would be signed between the private sector during the visit. -- BERNAMA