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Australian-Visit (With pix)

KEATING'S VISIT TO SET THE PACE FOR A NEW RELATIONSHIP

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KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 13 (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 on Monday.

Diplomatic ties took a nosedive in 1993 when Keating described Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as 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 met on three occasions -- at the second Apec meeting in Bogor (Indonesia) in 1994 and at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (Chogm) in Auckland (New Zealand) and the third Apec meeting in Osaka last year.

Keating will hold talks with Dr Mahathir again when he arrives here next week 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 remarks about Dr Mahathir, he expressed his regret over the statement. After his meeting with Keating in Bogor, Dr Mahathir told reporters that the word (recalcitrant) was no longer in the vocabulary.

While admitting that bilateral relations have been "rocky" in the past, Australian High Commissioner John Dauth said 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 benefit in our relationship," he told Bernama in an interview here recently.

Dauth, who will complete his three-year stint 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.

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

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

Dauth felt 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 when things seem to be getting better, something else went wrong."

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

The two governments have since realised that to reap the benefits in their relationship, they have to work hard. "You can't just take a relationship for granted... you have to invent new ways and we have to look forward together," he said.

Dauth said 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 relations for both sides," he said.

Dauth also clarified that Keating's visit was not to project a good image to face 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." Two-way trade stood at between RM7 and RM8 billion which, according to Dauth, was very satisfying to both sides.

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

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