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Mahathir-Howard '''

MAHATHIR AND HOWARD TO MEET IN BRISBANE

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, 14 March (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will stop over in Brisbane on March 29 on his way back from an official visit to New Zealand for talks with newly-elected Australian Prime Minister John Howard.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer will meet Dr Mahathir when the Malaysian leader stops over at Darwin on March 25 on his way to New Zealand.

In a statement today, Howard said he was looking forward to welcoming Dr Mahathir to Australia.

"I value greatly the opportunity for such contact with Dr Mahathir and the benefit of his views in the early weeks of my prime ministership.

"We shall have broad ranging discussions about our bilateral relationship and other regional and global issues of mutual interest," he said in the statement issued in Sydney.

Howard said he issued an invitation to Dr Mahathir shortly after being sworn in this week "because it is important that early in the life of the new Liberal Coalition Government there be top level contact between Australia and Malaysia."

"It is important, as I stressed during the election campaign, to see the election of a coalition government as continuing the strong relationship between Australia and the nations of our region," he said.

Downer told a press conference in Canberra that the meetings with Dr Mahathir would put to rest a recent claim by former Prime Minister Paul Keating that Asian leaders would not deal with people such as Howard or Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer.

Downer said former Foreign Affairs Department Secretary Richard Woolcott had travelled to Kuala Lumpur to act as a special envoy of the Howard Government to help set up the Brisbane meeting.

Malaysia's ties with Australia were strained after Keating described Dr Mahathir as "recalcitrant" in 1993 in response to the Malaysian leader's absence from the Seattle summit of APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) forum.

Keating however patched things up when he visited Kuala Lumpur in January.

Dr Mahathir last visited Australia in 1984 when he opened the Malaysian High Commission building in Canberra and met the then Prime Minister Bob Hawke.

An AAP (Australian Associated Press) report said there appeared to be some competition today between Howard and Downer to announce Dr Mahathir's visit which is described as a "diplomatic coup" for Howard.

Downer called a 3.15 pm news conference in Canberra to announce a "significant breakthrough" in relations with Malaysia but this was postponed shortly before it was due to start.

Howard then announced Dr Mahathir's visit to media outlets in Sydney at 4 pm, leaving Downer to finally hold his news conference at 4.30 pm. --

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