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Mahathir-Security

MAHATHIR ARRIVES IN FRENCH GUIANA AMID TIGHTENED SECURITY

By: Azman Ujang

CAYENNE (French Guiana), Nov 13 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrived in French Guiana on Tuesday night amid tightened security ahead of an expected general strike here on Wednesday called by workers in protest against unsatisfactory conditions in schools.

The Prime Minister flew in with his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali from an overnight visit to the Caribbean island nation of Trinidad and Tobago.

The stepped-up security, including reinforcements of soldiers airlifted from France followed Saturday's demonstrations and looting by students.

The unrest caused uncertainty over whether Dr Mahathir would make it here for the launch of Malaysia's second satellite, Measat-2, scheduled at 7.40pm on Wednesday (6.40am Thursday in Malaysia).

But in what is seen by officials of both Arianespace, the satellite launcher company, and Measat owner Binariang Sdn Bhd as the Prime Minister's personal support for yet another Malaysian success story, Dr Mahathir went ahead with his visit, much to the relief of the officials who have been working for months for the elaborate launch process.

Arianespace officials have been worried more about the inconvenience the expected general strike would cause Dr Mahathir's entourage, especially if the electricity supply is cut.

There was, however, no question about the satellite lift-off being called off due to the strike as it will take place at the Kourou Space Centre, located 60km from Cayenne, the capital of French Guiana.

On arrival at the airport here, Dr Mahathir was welcomed by Binariang chairman Tun Haniff Omar, its major shareholder Tan Sri T. Ananda Krishnan and Arianespace chairman and chief executive officer Charles Bigot.

Immediately after arrival, Dr Mahathir was driven to Hotel Atlantis in Kourou where he and some 200 guests from Malaysia are staying for the launch.

Commenting on the general strike due on the same day as the launch of the Measat-2, Haniff told Bernama: "It's a small problem. Bigger things have happened in Malaysia and I'm confident the French authorities will have it under control."

This tiny nation with 150,000 people on the northeastern coast of South America was made an overseas department of France in 1946. About 90 per cent of the people are Creoles, who are descendants of slaves brought to French Guiana during the 1600s and 1700s.

The rest are American Indians, Chinese, Europeans, Indochinese, Lebanese and Syrians.

Meanwhile, Hotel Atlantis and Hotel Des Roches, where some two dozen members of the Malaysian media are staying, have installed stand-by generators to brace for Wednesday's strike.

Binariang media relations manager Rodhiah Ismail was not taking chances. She even distributed candles to the journalists.

With less than 24 hours to the lift-off of Measat-2, the second spacecraft in Binariang's RM600 million regional satellite programme, officials at the Kourou Space Centre were in an upbeat mood as they conducted a series of briefings for the Malaysian journalists.

Phillipe Roland, the mission director of Flight 92, the Measat-2 launch into orbit, said even the weather was expected to be kind.

But he said the lift-off could be postponed for a day if there were

storms or strong winds.

Binariang senior manager Abdul Halim Abdul Majid said the fact that the company had two space satellites launched this year -- Measat-1 was launched in January -- would provide a competitive edge for Malaysia in numerous fields including business, technology and education. -- BERNAMA

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