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Mahathir-Downer

MAHATHIR MEETS DOWNER IN DARWIN

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, March 25 (Bernama) -- Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said after his informal meeting with Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Darwin tonight that Australia was looking forward to better trade and diplomatic relations with Malaysia.

Downer described his meeting with Dr Mahathir as "warm and easy".

"The meeting will be a good foundation for the bilateral relationship between the Malaysian and Australian governments," he told reporters after his 45-minute discussion with Dr Mahathir whose plane stopped in Darwin for refuelling before continuing his journey to New Zealand for a three-day official visit.

Downer said he and Dr Mahathir talked about the need to update the "somewhat redundant" trade agreement which existed between the two countries.

Other topics discussed included education links and the Transfield naval boat bid.

Downer said Dr Mahathir responded "with interest to the issues raised and that Dr Mahathir expected to hear further on the topics at a meeting with Australian Prime Minister John Howard in Brisbane on Friday.

He said tonight's meeting was a "very productive introduction" of the new Australian government to its Malaysian counterpart.

"There have been some differences of course at the political level and we clearly have a task to improve the political relationship and I think we have made a good start at that tonight," Downer said.

"The meeting I had with Dr Mahathir was a very positive, warm and easy meeting," he said.

"This meeting has provided very good foundations for the bilateral relations between Australia and Malaysia under a coalition government," he said.

Downer said he had stressed the importance of the bilateral relationship.

He said he told Dr Mahathir that Australia hoped to negotiate a new trade agreement with Malaysia this year.

On multilateral issues, Downer confirmed the Howard government's commitment to APEC and to Asean.

"Dr Mahathir flagged that he would be raising those issues and the issue of the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) with Mr Howard on Friday," Downer said.

Dr Mahathir, who looked in good spirits, did not speak to reporters. --

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