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Mahathir-Clinton

MAHATHIR TO MEET CLINTON FOR TALKS ON BILATERAL TIES

By: Salmy Hashim

SAN FRANCISCO, May 21 (Bernama) -- Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will meet President Bill Clinton at the White House on Tuesday to discuss Malaysia-U.S. relations and international issues of mutual concern.

Dr Mahathir revealed this here Monday at a news conference after opening the "Malaysia-U.S. Business and Technology Partnership" forum organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (Asli) and Pacific Basin Economic Council (PBEC) Malaysia.

He said the "few minutes" he would have with Clinton would also cover the Bosnia problem.

However, he said, he would not be bringing up the subject of the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC), the proposed consultative grouping of East Asian nations, because of time constraint.

The White House, on knowing that the Prime Minister would be in the United States from May 17-21 to address two business conferences in San Francisco and Washington DC, had hastily arranged the Clinton-Mahathir meeting for Monday, but the meeting was pushed to Tuesday as Dr Mahathir's schedule to address a 200-man conference in San Francisco had already been set.

This would be the second private meeting since last year between the two leaders who seem to have forged a warm and personal friendship.

At the previous meeting, Clinton had sought Dr Mahathir's views on China, the Asia Pacific region and bilateral issues.

Clinton did not appear slighted when Dr Mahathir kept away from the inaugural meeting of Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) leaders on Blake Island in 1993. Instead, at a news conference, he expressed his desire to meet with the Malaysian leader at some point.

The Prime Minister, who initially had some reservations about Apec, said in his speech here on Monday that he was now "fairly comfortable" with the Apec process, and pointed out that Malaysia would host the Apec summit in 1998.

In a dialogue with American businessmen following his speech, Dr Mahathir elaborated that he was happy that Apec took into consideration the needs of smaller, developing nations as it uplifted the members' economies through free trade and open markets.

"It is a forum of equals -- everybody has equal weight in terms of opinion. And we're comfortable with that," he said.

Clinton, although still hesitant to endorse EAEC, appears to take a much softer stance on the idea, originally proposed by Dr Mahathir -- in stark contrast to the hostile response by the previous President George Bush who called the proposal "racist" and "protectionist" because it excludes non-Asian countries.

The Prime Minister left San Francisco Monday afternoon, and on Tuesday he would deliver a speech on the "Asian values debate" at the 29th international general meeting of PBEC in Washington.

Dr Mahathir's one-day working visit to Washington also includes meetings with senior members of the U.S.-Asean Council, chief executives of American and multinational companies, a dialogue with Malaysian students, and a congressional luncheon hosted by Senator Christopher Bond, the chairman of the Senate Asia Pacific Study Group. At least eight U.S. senators are expected to attend.

Malaysian Ambassador to the United States, Datuk Dali Hashim, said the U.S. legislators were interested to hear the Prime Minister's views on future trends in U.S.-Malaysia relations, security issues in Southeast Asia, China, EAEC and how it relates to Apec, plus the role of Asean in Southeast Asia and how Malaysia views the membership of Vietnam in the grouping. -- BERNAMA

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