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Mahathir-NZ

NEW ZEALAND VISIT TO EXPAND ECONOMIC, EDUCATION COOPERATION

KUALA LUMPUR, March 21 (Bernama) -- The thrust of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to New Zealand next week will be to enhance cooperation in the economic and education fields, a top Wisma Putra official said today.

Datuk Abdul Halim Ali, Deputy Secretary-general (I), said Malaysia and New Zealand have long enjoyed a good relationship and this would be strengthened through more economic and trade linkages as well as education ties.

"Dr Mahathir's visit is part of our effort to promote the existing good relations between the two Commonwealth countries," he said when briefing reporters on the Prime Minister's four-day visit beginning Tuesday.

Malaysia is New Zealand's largest export market in Southeast Asia (RM673 million in 1995) and the second largest source of imports from the region after Singapore.

Although the trade balance has been in New Zealand's favour, its imports from Malaysia have been increasing steadily and last year year leapt by over half to reach RM390 million.

The two countries have a long history of people-to-people contact and have developed close cooperation in various fields, particularly education.

There are now about 2,000 Malaysian students in New Zealand and to date, more than 13,000 Malaysians have been educated in that country.

Halim said Malaysia and New Zealand had similar perceptions in many areas such as the nuclear issue and the provision of assistance to developing countries.

The Prime Minister's 28-member official delegation will include International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Deputy Foreign Minister Datuk Leo Michael Toyad and Deputy Agriculture Minister Datuk Tengku Mahmud Mansor. A 40-member business delegation is also following Dr Mahathir.

The Prime Minister is scheduled to hold talks with his New Zealand counterpart Jim Bolger soon after arrival in Wellington on Tuesday.

His tight programme includes inaugurating the Chair on Malay Studies at the Victoria University in Wellington, launching the New Zealand Asia Institute at the Auckland University in Auckland, addressing the New Zealand-Malaysia Business Council and meeting Malaysian students.

Halim said four documents would be signed during the visit. They are on education, defence, a broadcasting consultancy arrangement for the 1998 Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games and a working holiday arrangement.

The memorandum of understanding on education covers such matters as student exchanges and recognition of university degrees while the working holiday arrangement is to enable young people from both countries to stay and work in each other's country for a short period as part of efforts to promote mutual understanding.

The idea was mooted by Bolger who visited Malaysia in 1994.

The document on defence cooperation is to formalise the various activities that have been going on. Both Malaysia and New Zealand are members of the Five Power Defence Arrangement (with Australia, Britain and Singapore).

The broadcasting consultancy agreement is for TV New Zealand to assist RTM in the coverage of the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur.

On his way back to Malaysia, Dr Mahathir is scheduled to make a

two-hour stop-over in Brisbane, Australia, for a meeting with newly-elected Prime Minister John Howard.

Howard had requested the meeting and according to Halim, it is basically for the two leaders to get to know each other and perhaps touch base on issues of common interest.

"There was a specific request by Howard to meet Dr Mahathir and he (Dr Mahathir) has agreed to it," Halim said.

"I have no idea what they are going to discuss ... maybe Howard wants to touch base (with Dr Mahathir) and express Australia's desire to have good ties with Malaysia." -- BERNAMA

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