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Mahathir-Australia

NOT TIME YET FOR AUSTRALIA TO JOIN ASEAN, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 16 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today it is not time yet for Australia to join Asean.

Dr Mahathir said the issue of Australia joining Asean was not discussed when Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating called on him at his office in the Prime Minister's Department here.

"Not at the moment, I think," he said when replying to a question by an Australian reporter after the meeting.

He was commenting on Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's statement in the 'The Australian Financial Review' yesterday that Australia and New Zealand could one day join the seven-member Asean and that the idea is "thinkable" and one for "debate".

Keating arrived here yesterday for a three-day official visit.

"Keating made it clear last night (in his speech at a dinner hosted by Dr Mahathir in his honour) that Australia do not wish to become an Asean (member) country, European country or an American country but Australia, and Malaysia appreciated it," Dr Mahathir said.

Dr Mahathir said they mainly discussed Australian and Asian economic relations and "not so much on the political side".

Meanwhile, Foreign Ministry Secretary-General Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar said the idea of Australia joining Asean was too early to be discussed as Asean's priority was to get all the 10 Southeast Asian countries into its fold by the turn of the century.

"Perhaps it is too soon to look into the concept of opening up the geographical perimeter of Asean," he said.

Ahmad Kamil, when briefing the local media on the one-hour meeting between Dr Mahathir and Keating, said it was mainly on bilateral trade, telecommunications, R&D, banking and filming training.

Both leaders had also agreed that the two countries share their expertise to allow their private companies to jointly undertake development projects in other Third World countries, he said.

Ahmad Kamil said Malaysia-Australia relationship would stress more on trade and economy.

Currently, Malaysian investment in Australia totalled US\$3 billion while Australian investment in Malaysia was US\$300 million, he said.

He said Keating informed Dr Mahathir on his country's automobile import duty cut and lifting of import quota.

Malaysia had exported 1,151 Proton cars to Australia for the past six months, he said.

He said Australia was willing to share its expertise in advanced electronic banking system with Malaysia.

Australia is also willing to share its expertise on filming school to develop actors, directors and film making.

Ahmad Kamil said Dr Mahathir had asked Australia to be more responsive to the Middle East issues, especially the Israel-Palestine peace process.

Dr Mahathir also briefed his Australian counterpart on the recent Asean Summit, Malaysian troops' continued presence in Bosnia and the launching of Malaysia's first satellite, Measat I.

Dr Mahathir has invited Keating to make an unofficial visit to the country, particularly Langkawi. -- BERNAMA