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Mahathir-Australia

MAHATHIR'S VISIT A COUP FOR NEW GOVERNMENT, SAYS AUSSIE PRESS

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, March 15 (Bernama) -- Most broadsheet newspapers displayed the news of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathis Mohamed's stopover visit to Australia on March 29 on their front pages today.

Nearly all newspapers throughout the country said the planned visit by the Malaysian leader was a diplomatic coup for the newly-elected Australian Prime Minister John Howard.

Former Foreign Affairs Minister Gareth Evans welcomed the visit as an excellent opportunity for the government to make personal contacts with Dr Mahathir and build on the visit to Kuala Lumpur in January by former Prime Minister Paul Keating.

Writing in "The Australia," the paper's foreign affairs writer Don Greenless said that by accepting Howard's invitation to visit Australia on his way back from New Zealand, Dr Mahathir had "delivered a boost to the (Howard) Government's attempts to build links with Asia."

Greenless noted that Howard had "secretly dispatched a special envoy (former Foreign Affairs Department head Richard Woolcott) to Kuala Lumpur to issue the personal invitation to Dr Mahathir."

In the same newspaper, its foreign affairs expert Greg Sheridan said Dr Mahathir's decision to visit Australia briefly represented a significant diplomatic breakthrough for the new Australian Government and indicated that it would be able to deal effectively with Asia so long as it handled itself intelligently.

He said: "The visit marks a particular success for the new Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. Having criticised the Labour Government for mismanaging the Malaysian relationship, he (Downer) took the view that the change of government offered an opportunity to improve it substantially.

"Downer also believes that the previous government's policy of trenchant opposition to Malaysia's proposed East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) was ill-advised.

"He plans to reverse that position, presumably, during Dr Mahathir's visit."

In "The Age" newspaper, its former Southeast Asia correspondent Lindsay Murdoch, who is now based in Canberra, said "the new government has won the acceptance" of Dr Mahathir.

Saying that Dr Mahathir had repeatedly blocked Australia's regional ambitions, Murdoch noted that Dr Mahathir had previously refused to visit Australia although he made a formal visit in 1984 to open the new High Commission building in Canberra.

The Financial Review's East Asia specialist Michael Dwyer said Dr Mahathir's visit "signals a new conciliatory approach to relations with Malaysia, and will be used by the government in a bid to ensure Australia had a place at the critical 1998 Asia-Europe Summit."

Australia's opposition to EAEC which did not include countries like Australia and the United States also strained the relationship, he added.

Dwyer said: "It now appears that the new coalition government (of Howard) will take a much softer line on the EAEC.

"Australia's initial opposition to the EAEC was largely due to concerns that its development would not be conducive to a continued role for the United States in the East Asia region.

"But those concerns have now largely been overcome by the emergence of APEC as a viable regional organisation which includes the US."

Australia now was likely to use its new support for EAEC to try to convince Malaysia to overturn its veto on Australia's attendance at future Asia-Europe summits, he added. -- BERNAMA

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