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Anwar: Controversy over Aussie race row simply a view of the minority

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues - Malaysia does not view positively the controversy over the race row generated and stoked by maverick Australian Member of Parliament Pauline Hanson, but it can acknowledge that it is a minority view in Australia.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, when asked by Australian journalists if he believed the controversy had done any damage to Australia's image in the region, said: "It is a very small minority and certainly does not represent the sentiments of the Australian people and certainly not of the Australian Government.

"Malaysia certainly sees this as not representing the Australian sentiments and therefore a minor issue."

Anwar had earlier met Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer at the Prime Minister's Department.

Asked if he thought the controversy made Malaysians suspect the goodwill of Australians towards Malaysia, Anwar said he did not think so as the last few years had seen "remarkable progress" in bilateral relations, visits and people-to-people relations which were not limited to government but also in the private sector including non-governmental organisations.

On whether Australians worried "a bit too much" about damage or perceived damage to relations, Anwar said: "I think it is a minority view due to media perception which needs to be corrected. Look at the facts, you can see remarkable progress."

Asked if he thought Australia should be part of the Asia-Europe Summit at some time and when, he said it would have to be looked at because Malaysia's position as explained by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was that initially the summit was for East Asia and Europe.

"So it is not seen to exclude countries but if there is a need to look at it again and discuss the need to expand, then we'll have to have a consensus to expand.

"But as it stands the assumption or feeling that it is a deliberate attempt to exclude countries is certainly not true. At the beginning when the idea was mooted, it was essentially for countries within East Asia and Europe. But I don't see any difficulty at looking at it again."

Anwar was also paid a visit by India's Foreign Minister P. Chidambaram at the Prime Minister's Department.

Briefing reporters after the visit, deputy secretary-general of the treasury Datuk Dr Aris Othman said Chidambaram had welcomed Proton's proposal to set up a plant there and spoke of the many opportunities available in infrastructure building.

"India has asked Asean to discuss with it how banking and financial institutions on both sides can be strengthened. Chidambaram also raised the matter of delay in getting visas by Indian nationals, especially businessmen.

"He asked that the strict rules for getting a visa be relaxed," Aris said.

He said Chidambaram had asked that India be allowed to open a bank here and agreed to reciprocate in the event permission is granted.

Aris said India had also asked for Malaysia's support for its candidate for the Inter-Parliamentary Union presidency which was also being contested by candidates from Argentina and Spain.

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