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Castro may visit Malaysia next year

Kamarul Yunus in Havana

HAVANA, Sun: Cuban President Fidel Castro may visit Malaysia next year. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he has invited Castro over and the visit is likely to take place next year.

"No, he will not come to Malaysia this year. My schedule is full for this year," he told Malaysia journalists covering his four-day official visit to Cuba since Thursday.

Cuba is his first stop of an 11-day, four-nation Latin America tour. Dr Mahathir leaves for Chile tomorrow and will also visit Uruguay and Argentina.

Asked on his impression towards Castro, Dr Mahathir said: "He is a very sincere man who still holds on to the communist ideology or socialism."

The Prime Minister sees Castro "more as a nationalist rather than a communist".

"In my opinion, most of those who are portrayed as communists are actually nationalists. Only their approach to solve problems is different from us but they are nationalists in trying to free their country. This is not wrong.

"Furthermore, they are not going to declare war against us. In fact, they did not even question whether we are capitalists," he added.

Dr Mahathir said although Castro seemed to be living in "a different time capsule", the world should be reminded that Castro has experienced pressures, including internal problems.

Thus, he said, Castro should be given a chance to slowly implement changes in terms of investments to foreign countries.

"He has already adopted an open policy," he said, adding that the situation in Cuba is "almost similar to Myanmar", which previously adopted isolationism, its own style of socialism.

"But now, Myanmar has opened up its door to foreign investment. Thus, we should recognise and appreciate the steps taken by Myanmar to implement changes, although not as drastic as what some countries had hoped for because this could destabilise the whole thing."

Asked to speculate on what would happen when Castro is no longer around to take charge of the Cuban government, Dr Mahathir said: "Many would believe that Cuba will face changes when Castro is no more around but this is not so."

He said the Cubans accept their Government not because they are pressured or forced to, as alleged by the Western media.

On whether the US will play a dominant role after Castro's era ends, Dr Mahathir said as much as the US hope they can do it, there is no certainty that the Cubans will accept US presence in Cuba.

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