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China supports UN charter review plan (HL)

Kamarul Yunus; Kang Siew Li

CHINA, a veto-wielding member of the Security Council, is backing Malaysia's proposed review of the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Mr Li Peng, the visiting Chinese premier, told Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that Beijing is prepared to cooperate and participate in any discussion or seminar.

The two leaders met in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was also present at the meeting, later told reporters that Li agreed with Dr Mahathir that some of the provisions under the Declaration may not be relevant today.

"Li supports Malaysia's move for a review of the declaration and will like to participate in any discussion, whether at the expert or group level or any seminar organised by Malaysia," he added.

He also said both leaders recognise any effort to review or amend the declaration on human rights, saying that the amendment will benefit the developing and poor countries.

"As it is now, certain developed countries want human rights as a requirement for the developing and small countries to enhance bilateral relations.

"Both leaders agreed that there seems to be a situation whereby the developed countries are pressuring the developing and poor countries on the issue of human rights.

"If left unchecked, it would not be healthy situation for the developing countries," he added.

Asked on the progress in Malaysia's plan to review the declaration on human rights, Abdullah said the Foreign Ministry is currently outlining a working paper on the proposed review.

"When completed, we will present the working paper to the UN," he added.

At a separate press briefing, Mr Shen Guofang, spokesman for China's Foreign Affairs Ministry, said Li expressed China's appreciation of Dr Mahathir for refuting the "China threat" theory in public on many occasions and for Malaysia's "clear-cut support for China on human rights issues".

"Li agrees that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been in existence for nearly 50 years and over the years the world situation has undergone dramatic changes.

"Thus ... the UN declaration has some historical restrictions," Shen said.

China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, together with the US, the UK, France and Russia.

The US has expressed strong opposition against the idea, which Dr Mahathir expanded during the Asean Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur last month. Economic Adviser to the Government Tun Daim Zainuddin had mooted the idea.

Earlier in the day, when addressing participants at a talk on bilateral relations between the two countries, Li said China appreciates and supports the move by Malaysia to push for a review of the declaration on human rights.

Li said Dr Mahathir's call for a review of the declaration was, in China's view, "one of vision and courage".

Dr Mahathir had said that Malaysia's proposed review of the declaration

would not in any way dilute it but rather redress the unsympathetic view of human rights problems in developing countries.

He had said Malaysia would continue to call for a review of the declaration which it considered as outdated.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who attended the AMM's Post-Ministerial Meeting, had said that Washington would resist any attempt to dilute the declaration which she claimed was accepted as a universal benchmark for protection of human rights.

The Malaysian proposal had created a clash between several Asian countries and the US and the European Union during a news conference at the end of the PMC on July 29.

The two Western allies had objected to the review, saying it was a serious attempt to dilute the declaration, drawing a heated rebuttal from Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and China.

Besides the human rights issue, Abdullah said the meeting also touched on other international issues such as the need to develop new central powers within Europe and Asia, the overlapping claims in South China Sea, political instability in Cambodia and the proposed East Asia Economic Caucus.

Abdullah said international issues dominated the meeting between Dr Mahathir and Li, which lasted over an hour.

He added that it was one of the longest one-on-one meetings between the Prime Minister and a visiting head of government.

Li, who arrived in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday, is on a four-day official visit to Malaysia.

He will also visit Penang.

On the issue of human rights, Abdullah said both leaders concurred that there is need to develop new central powers within Europe and Asia to prevent hegemony where one country "controls everything".

"On the subject of the North-East polarity, both leaders share the view that other central powers in Europe and Asia should also be developed and be given attention.

"This is because at the moment, so much attention has been given to the role of the US," he said.