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Japanese PM hopes for 'closer and deeper' ties

VISITING Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, during his two-hour meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, expressed his hopes for a "closer and deeper" ties between Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) and Japan.

A senior Japan Foreign Ministry official said at a press briefing after the meeting, Hashimoto also spoke at length on the hostage crisis in Peru, where a large number of people are still held by the Tupac Amaru rebels in the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima.

In expressing his concern over the situation, Hashimoto had told Dr Mahathir his decision to go-ahead with his trip to Asean was motivated by the importance Japan attaches to its ties with Asean.

This stemmed from longstanding ties and the growing importance of Asean to Japan's economic and foreign policy agenda, the official said.

Hashimoto, who thanked Dr Mahathir for Malaysia's cooperation during the hostage crisis, said Japan cannot yield to terrorism and that he is seeking the moral support from Asean for Peruvian President Fujimori during his efforts to seek a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

Hashimoto's call for more exchanges of information on this and similar incidents between the two countries was welcomed by Dr Mahathir, the official said, adding that Malaysia supported Fujimori's efforts.

Hashimoto also expressed his desire to make efforts to broaden and deepen the scope of Japan- Asean relations which has hitherto pivoted on economic aspects.

Japan is prepared, for example, to share both its successes and failures in environment, social welfare and dadah.

Hashimoto, who described Asean history as "a history of success", and that its economic and political stability 'deserves nothing but praise', added, however, the inclusion of three new members posed new challenges to Asean.

Japan has been quite open on its opposition to Myanmar's regime in the past.

When pressed on the issue, the official confirmed Japan's stance but said Hashimoto did not voice his opposition during the meeting with Dr Mahathir.

For a continued momentum of peace and stability, Hashimoto added that not only is US presence essential - in an economic, political and military sense - but that it is essential to engage in China as a constructive partner in the international community through Asean Regional Forum and World Trade Organisation, for example.

Hashimoto also conveyed his sympathy for the victims in the storm that raged the west coast of Sabah and killed 199 people.

Dr Mahathir, in turn, thanked Japan for its prompt assistance in offering, among other things, relief goods to the affected areas.

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