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KL and London to hold regular meetings

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Malaysia and Britain have agreed to hold regular meetings between senior officials to further enhance bilateral relations.

This was one of the issues discussed in a meeting between Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook at Wisma Putra today.

Speaking to reporters later, Abdullah said they agreed that such meetings be held to allow for an exchange of views on issues of mutual interest and importance.

"There is no such arrangement now, and we feel that this is substantial to allow us to exchange views in our efforts to enhance existing bilateral ties," he said.

Abdullah said while Malaysia and Britain had differences over certain matters, it was important for both to meet and make their stand clear. However, he said it need not be held in a formal manner.

Later, Cook called on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Abdullah's discussions with Cook also touched on the developments in Bosnia-Herzegovina where Malaysia has a military contingent deployed under the Nato-led Stabilisation Force and serving under the British sector.

But, he said, the focus was more on the future of the Balkan republic where the SFOR mandate was expected to end in June next year.

"I conveyed to him the need to create a stable and peaceful Bosnia before we can pull the international military force out. There is still an imbalance of power between the Bosnian forces and the Serbs and we are worried about the possibility of another round of aggression," he said.

Their meeting also touched on Myanmar's entry into Asean, which Britain has opposed.

Abdullah said he briefed Cook on Asean's perspective of constructive engagement and not wanting to isolate Myanmar despite the Western world's criticism of its human rights record.

Later, Cook, during a talk on "Southeast Asia and Beyond: Britain's Partners for the 21st Century", said his visit to Southeast Asia, which comes just four months after the Labour Government was installed, demonstrated his new Government's recognition of the global importance of this region.

"There could be no better place for a British Foreign Minister to begin a tour of Southeast Asia than Malaysia. Dr Mahathir said in April that 'British friends are the most comfortable'.

"In my short time in Malaysia, I have indeed been made to feel comfortable. I have felt the goodwill that exists for Britain among so many of the people of Malaysia," he said.

Cook said recent turbulence in the financial markets should not obscure the underlying strength of the economics of Southeast Asia.

Later at Press conference, he said, his talks with Dr Mahathir included that on the Prime Minister's recent call to review the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and added that the subject needed to be approached with caution.

"Instead of looking at it as out of date since it was formulated 50 years, we must look at it as having passed the test of time and protects the fundamental rights of everyone," he said.

Cook said he and Dr Mahathir also discussed common positions that can be

taken on the environment at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London including possible agreement on forestry management.

Cook, on a two-day official visit here, later left for Jakarta.

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