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Australia-Malaysia

AUSTRALIA-MALAYSIA TIES "HEALTHY AND DIVERSE", SAYS AUSSIE ENVOY

By: E.Sivabalan

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 19 (Bernama) -- Australian Prime Minister John Howard will set the stage for renewed Australia-Malaysia relations by pledging Canberra's commitment to develop "very positive" ties with Kuala Lumpur during his trip to Malaysia next week.

Australian High Commissioner here Robert Cotton said Howard's visit was aimed at continuing the process to bolster the already "healthy and diverse" bilateral ties.

While admitting that "there have been sensitivities in the past", Cotton said Australia and Malaysia had been able to overcome them.

"Bilateral government-to-government relationship is increasingly positive and moving forward in a positive way... We believe we are capable enough to move on in a more positive way," he told Bernama in an interview here today, ahead of the Australian Prime Minister's two-day official visit to Malaysia beginning Monday.

Howard will be making his first official visit to Malaysia since taking over the prime ministership from Paul Keating in March 1996.

He is scheduled to hold talks with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad here. The two leaders last met on March 29, 1996, when the Malaysian leader stopped over briefly in Australia en route to and from New Zealand for an official visit.

Malaysia's relations with Australia under the former Labour government were strained at times, with Kuala Lumpur blaming Canberra for what it viewed as unflattering film and television portrayals of Malaysia.

Ties hit a low point in late 1993 after Keating called Dr Mahathir a "recalcitrant" for not attending the inaugural Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) summit in Seattle, United States.

It was reported recently that Howard had made efforts to restore Australia's "fragile" relationship with Malaysia as one of his government's foreign policy priorities, but that there had been little noticeable improvement since the change of government in March 1996.

In denying the report, Cotton said the flurry of visits by Australian ministers to Malaysia last year and the statements by Malaysian leaders proved that Australia-Malaysia ties were on the right track.

Cotton said bilateral ties had been so good that "there are no outstanding issues that need to be thrashed out."

He also said it was unfair to say that the Australian media had been a stumbling block to good Australia-Malaysia relations.

"We in Australia have a different approach from the media in Malaysia and that is to be expected, reflecting as it does the different political, social and cultural environment of our two nations," he said.

Asked if Australia and Malaysia would sign any agreement or memorandum of understanding during Howard's visit, Cotton said he hoped that the Monash University-Sunway College agreement could be signed.

Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak had said recently that Monash would set up a branch campus here.

"We are hopeful that several (agreements) will be signed while he is here," Cotton added. -- BERNAMA

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