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Downer - Business

AUSTRALIA WON'T WALK AWAY, DOWNER ASSURES MALAYSIA

KUALA LUMPUR, July 23 (Bernama) -- Australia will not walk away from Malaysia but will remain engaged in business activities in the country throughout the economic crisis, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said today.

"Australia is a friend of Malaysia not only during easy time but in a long haul. I made it clear to the Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) that Australian businesses throughout the economic crisis will remain engaged and will not just walk away during this difficult time," he said after meeting Dr Mahathir here.

Downer arrived here yesterday for a three-day visit, his fourth since becoming Foreign Minister in early 1996.

He said Australian businessmen knew that Malaysia needed time to recover and that they too could benefit much from that recovery.

"They also realise that if they walk away now from the Malaysian economy, they will find it very hard to get back into the Malaysian market when the good time returns," he said.

He said with Australian business directly supporting the countries in the region proved that Australia would actively engage and continue to be interested in investment opportunities in Malaysia.

Downer said his discussions with Dr Mahathir focussed on the forthcoming Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum meeting to be held here in November.

He said he had also suggested to Dr Mahathir that APEC countries develop a system for them to address the Asian economic crisis and assist each other in overcoming it.

Downer also confirmed that there had been a 17 per cent drop since last year in the number of Malaysians pursuing further studies in Australia, one of the more popular choices among Malaysian students.

"On the other hand I was advised that the percentage decline of student visas to the United States, Canada and United Kingdom, had been considerably greater," he said.

On whether negative statements against Asians by Pauline Hanson, the One Nation Party leader contributed to the drop in the percentage, Downer said: "We have no evidence that Pauline's comments have had anything to do with that."

He said Australia still offered the best opportunities for Malaysian students compared with other competing countries and that was why the drop in student arrivals in Australia was comparatively lower.

Moreover, Downer said, Malaysian students would also be allowed to work for up to 20 hours a week during their study time and work full time during vacation to help meet their education costs in Australia.

Earlier, Downer conferred the Honorary Order of Australia on chairman of the Malaysia-Australia Foundation executive committee Datuk Lee Yee Cheong at a ceremony here.

The award was given to Lee, 61, in recognition for his contribution to the development of Australia-Malaysia bilateral relations and the foundation's role in strengthening student and cultural links between both countries, said Downer.

Lee's association with Australia started when he was studying at the University of Adelaide in 1961.

-- BERNAMA

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