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Howard-Mahathir

HOWARD WILL MEET MAHATHIR UNLIKE OTHER LEADERS

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, Nov 12 (Bernama) -- Australian Prime Minister John Howard said he will hold bilateral talks with his Malaysian counterpart Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Kuala Lumpur next week unlike other leaders who will be attending the APEC summit.

Howard said close ties between Australia and Malaysia were more important than any boycott over the arrest of former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

He told Parliament that Australia would not blindly follow the lead of countries which were not part of the region.

"I think it's very important in circumstances such as this, given the character of our relationship and given the importance of the bilateral relationship and the fact we are part of this region, that we don't just automatically follow the stances of countries that are not part of this region," he said.

"If you have concerns about what may be happening inside a country, your obligation is to meet face to face with the head of government of that country and to express those concerns.

"I will be talking in a very open and constructive fashion to the Prime Minister of Malaysia," said Howard, who was one of the first leaders to express concerns about Anwar's arrest in September.

Howard today also raised concerns over Japan's stand to delay a key APEC agreement which will accelerate free trade in 15 key sectors and help smoothen the path of 40 per cent of regional trade.

Japan is refusing to lift trade barriers to its forestry and fisheries industries and is set to offer struggling Asian countries up to A\$300 million in aid in return for supporting the stand in Kuala Lumpur.

Australian officials said the Japanese stand could undermine the whole APEC free trade agenda and would send the wrong signal to the world about the future of trade barriers.

Trade Minister Tim Fischer, who left for Kuala Lumpur last night, said he was disappointed with Japan's stand.

"I'm mightly underwhelmed by Japan's approach ... in the lead up to the Kuala Lumpur meetings," he said.

"I think that the threat of slippage with regard to trade worldwide is very real. I think that would be a disastrous course. It would only extend the economic difficulties being faced by so many economies around the world at this time," Fischer added.

-- BERNAMA

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