

22/02/1998

Howard puts off visit because of Iraqi crisis

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Australian Prime Minister John Howard, who was due tomorrow for his first official visit to Malaysia, has postponed the trip because of the situation in Iraq.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Howard phoned him this morning to inform him of this.

"He said he has to remain in Australia to make a decision (of Australian participation in the Gulf) if there is a need," Dr Mahathir said at the Kongsu Raya gathering organised by the Prime Minister's Department.

Dr Mahathir did not raise Malaysia's opposition to the military option during his telephone conversation with Howard.

At a Press conference later, Australian High Commissioner Bob Cotton distributed copies of a transcript of Howard's comments in Sydney on why he had to postpone his visit.

"The main reason for Howard not coming is that he believes he needs to be in Australia during this coming week in case he needs to make decisions on behalf of the Australian Government and the people with reference to Iraq," he said.

Cotton said he, thus, had to announce with "a great deal of disappointment" that Howard had decided to defer his visit to Malaysia.

He added that in their telephone conversation earlier, both Dr Mahathir and Howard agreed under the circumstances it would be appropriate for the visit to be postponed.

"The other message is that Howard was keen to come to convey his confidence in Malaysia's ability to successfully find its way through the current economic difficulties," Cotton said.

He said the Australian Government had also established long standing ties with Malaysia and Howard's visit was also to strengthen it.

"The decision to postpone the visit had been a very difficult one for Mr Howard, but it was important for him to be in Australia if crucial decisions needed to be made concerning Australian troops in the Gulf," he said.

Cotton also took the opportunity to convey his own disappointment over the postponement of Howard's visit.

"I want to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for all the hardwork that the Malaysian officials have put through this programme," he said, adding that he regretted the inconveniences caused.

He said some major events scheduled during Howard's visit, particularly the Malaysian Australian Foundation function and a lunch hosted by the Malaysian Australian Business Council, where Howard was expected to make a major speech on Malaysia-Australia trade relations, investment and commercial links, would now have to be deferred.

"We hope to reschedule the visit to another time. It has certainly been postponed and not cancelled."

From the transcript released in Australia, both Dr Mahathir and Howard agreed that officials should get down to work on new dates for the visit.

Among the issues to have been discussed between Dr Mahathir and Howard were on bilateral relations.

Cotton said Howard's decision to postpone the visit was "absolutely no indication" that the US was prepared to launch military strike against Iraq.

"We hope to reach a peaceful resolution."

He said Canberra hoped UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's visit to Baghdad would succeed.

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