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Howard-Visit

HOWARD TO VISIT MALAYSIA NEXT MONTH

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, Jan 19 (Bernama) -- Australian Prime Minister John Howard today announced that he will make an official visit to Malaysia from Feb 22 to 24.

Howard linked the timing of the trip to the Asian economic crisis which, although having an impact on Malaysia, it has not had to follow Indonesia, Thailand and South Korea in requesting assistance from the International Monetary Fund.

"Given the difficulties of our friends and neighbours in the region this is not a time to reduce our association with the countries in the region," he said today.

"Rather it's a time to extend a helping hand, to demonstrate as we did in relation to the assistance we gave for Thailand and for Indonesia and also for Korea the fact that Australia is a good regional neighbour.

"And most importantly we are strong enough and economically powerful enough to give assistance to these countries."

Howard, who is languishing in opinion polls despite a landslide victory over Paul Keating about two years, is looking forward to meeting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Kuala Lumpur.

Howard's slide in popularity began when he refused to take Independent MP Pauline Hanson to task for her provocative views on Asian migration and Aborigine welfare.

His leadership credentials have been questioned several times on a range of issues and there are serious doubts among political commentators of his ability to win the next election due some time in the second half of this year.

This is Howard's first visit to Malaysia since becoming Prime Minister about two years ago.

Although Howard made restoring Australia's fragile relationship with Malaysia one of his government's foreign policy priorities, analysts say there has been little evidence of any improvement since his election.

They point out that Malaysia continues to block Australia's attempt to join the ASEM grouping linking East Asia and the European Union.

Howard and Dr Mahathir met briefly in Brisbane in March 1996 when the Malaysian Prime Minister stopped over on his way home from a visit to New Zealand. -- BERNAMA

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