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APEC-NEWS-HOWARD LEAD

HOWARD: I WILL STRIVE TO MAINTAIN CORDIAL TIES WITH M'SIA

By: Abdul Rahman Ahmad

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 16 (Bernama) -- Australia will strive to maintain close ties with Malaysia despite recent remarks by its Prime Minister John Howard over the handling of the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim issue.

Howard said he would always work towards forging good relations with Malaysia.

He said some 150,000 Malaysians had studied in Australia, saying that "this is a close link-up between the two countries.

Describing Australia-Malaysia relations as important, he, however, said differences of opinion could not be avoided.

He said he had frank discussions with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the bilateral meeting today.

Asked on reports that Malaysia-Australia ties had strained due to his recent remarks over the Anwar issue, Howard said: The bilateral relationship is important to Australia and that is why I want to meet Dr Mahathir. We had frank and courteous discussions."

On the Anwar issue, he said he had conveyed Australia's view to Dr Mahathir.

Asked whether the former deputy prime minister is given a fair trial, Howard said: "I expressed some views to him (Dr Mahathir) and he even favoured me with a response ... and I just left it at that."

Asked what was Dr Mahathir's response to his views on the issue, Howard said it was best to ask Dr Mahathir himself.

Anwar is facing five charges of corruption and five counts of unnatural sex.

The resumed hearing on four of the five corruption charges would start on Nov 23.

-- BERNAMA

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