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Snub-denial

MAHATHIR DID NOT SNUB BRITISH MINISTER, SAYS ENVOY

By: Wan A Hulaimi

LONDON, May 7 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad did not snub British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown during the latter's brief stopover in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday, said the Malaysian High Commissioner here.

Datuk Mohamad Amir Jaafar's denial follows a report on the front page of the Guardian newspaper which said Dr Mahathir deliberately refused to meet Brown because he blamed Western speculators for Asia's financial crisis.

The report, filed by reporter Mark Atkinson from Kuala Lumpur, further speculated that Dr Mahathir's refusal could also be "linked to his anger at British press coverage of recent riots in a Malaysian detention centre for illegal immigrants".

Amir, speaking on the BBC Radio 4 news programme "PM" yesterday, said Dr Mahathir's inability to meet Brown was simply due to a lack of time because the British minister arrived in Malaysia at 7pm on Tuesday and left at 8 the following morning.

Brown was warmly received by Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Anwar Ibrahim at the airport and later had a very useful discussion with him over dinner, Amir said.

In a press release later, the Malaysian High Commission said it was unnecessary for anyone to jump to any conclusion other than the fact that Brown's stay of only one night in Malaysia had not given any opportunity for Dr Mahathir to receive him.

"Indeed Malaysia would always welcome the visit by British leaders and the people of Britain to Malaysia either for official, business or social purposes. We believe there is so much that could still be done for mutual benefit of the two countries through bilateral visits at various levels," the release said.

The Guardian report, clearly intended to stoke the fire of controversy soon after a report in its sister Sunday newspaper "The Observer" of poisonings and deaths in a Malaysian detention camp, was accompanied by a cartoon showing Brown looking very bemused while a Malaysian police officer gave him the two finger salute.

A thought bubble over Brown's head read: "It's the Malaysian salute, I suppose."

Under the headline "Snub for Brown as Malaysian PM too busy to talk", the report itself admitted that a meeting was never formally scheduled before going on to say that it was 'understood' (a common journalistic shorthand to indicate unsubstantiated or anonymous sources) that embassy officials had requested talks with Dr Mahathir.

Brown was on a flying visit to Southeast Asia to study the economic situation before this weekend's G7 finance ministers' meeting in Birmingham.

The report said that according to diplomatic sources, Dr Mahathir's schedule was "immovably" fixed. But it did not mention that protocol-wise it was appropriate that Brown, although a key member of the cabinet of Prime Minister Tony Blair but not his appointed deputy, was met by his Malaysian counterpart and deputy premier.

Mischievously, the Guardian reporter added: "In what could be interpreted as a snub to Dr Mahathir, Mr Brown went out of his way to praise Mr Anwar, saying: 'He is a figure of great stature on the world

economic stage.'" "

The interview on BBC Radio was the second time that Amir appeared on the British media in less than a week to explain the policies of Malaysia.

Last Sunday, he appeared on the BBC Channel 2 programme "Correspondent" to answer allegations of mistreatment and poisoning of Indonesians in a Malaysian detention camp.

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