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Mahathir-Japan

MAHATHIR IN FOR TIGHTEST EVER PROGRAMME IN JAPAN VISIT

By: Azman Ujang

TOKYO, Oct 15 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a regular visitor to Japan but when he arrives here tomorrow for a five-day working visit, he is in for what the Malaysian ambassador here describes as his "tightest ever" programme.

Tan Sri Khatib Abdul Hamid, who has been heading the Malaysian embassy here for nine years, said today that never before had he and his officers had to arrange such a hectic schedule for the prime minister.

He cited three main reasons for the deluge of requests the embassy had received from the Japanese media, businessmen, academia and government officials to meet with Dr Mahathir this time around.

They are Malaysia's recent move to introduce currency and exchange controls to insulate the economy from external uncertainties, political developments following the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and concern in Japan over Kuala Lumpur's strained relations with Singapore.

Briefing Malaysian journalists here on the visit, Khatib said while some Japanese companies had welcomed the exchange controls such as making the the Malaysian currency inconvertible and pegging the ringgit pegged at RM3.80 to the US\$1 as this would make their investment plans more predictable, there were also others who were uncertain about the question of transfer of profits and dividends arising from the move.

He said top Japanese businessmen who would be meeting Dr Mahathir in his series of meetings here over the next five days were anxious to hear from the prime minister to allay "perceptions of uncertainties" about their investments in Malaysia.

The intense interest his visit has generated among the media is best reflected in the first day programme alone when Dr Mahathir will sit down with editors-in-chief of eight major Japanese newspapers, Kyodo news agency and NHK, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation.

There will also be interviews with other media organisations during the visit as well as meetings with Keidanren, the top-notch Japanese chamber of commerce, Japanese prime minister Keizo Obuchi and an audience with Emperor Akihito.

But Khatib said the main purpose of Dr Mahathir's visit here was to attend the second Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD II) opening here on Monday, a follow-up to TICAD I held here in 1993 under a Japanese government initiative to push for development in still largely poor African countries.

Dr Mahathir, himself a strong advocate of African development through South-South cooperation, will address the conference to be attended by 10 African heads of government.

In Khatib's view, Africa has always been close to Malaysia's heart, starting with the country being involved in United Nations peace-keeping efforts in Congo in early 1960's, and very much later in countries like Somalia and Mozambique.

Malaysia is also involved in the construction of a hydro-electric project in Tanzania, rice cultivation in Guinea in West Africa, a joint-venture by Malaysia's TV3 in running a private television station in Ghana, timber ventures in Gabon and an oil production joint-venture in Sudan.

"Because of our efforts in helping African countries such as through

our Technical Assistance Programme, I as Malaysian ambassador here is well regarded by ambassadors from African countries," Khatib said.

On political developments arising from Anwar's firing six weeks ago, Khatib said while the official Japanese government stand on the issue was one of non-interference, the Japanese media mostly depended on Western news agencies for coverage of the unfolding events in Malaysia.

"Dr Mahathir in his interviews with the various domestic Japanese media here will be able to present the Malaysian government side of the story rather than from a Western slant as the Japanese people have been getting," he said.

Asked about concern in Japan regarding problems in Malaysia-Singapore ties, Khatib said this was understandable because like in Malaysia, Japan had huge investments in neighbouring Singapore.

"Many Japanese companies have regional headquarters in Singapore and naturally they are concerned if there are problems in relations between the two countries," he said.

Malaysia's ties with Singapore are being strained by disagreement over the future of the water supply pact and Malaysian-owned railway land in the city state as well as the recent ban by Malaysia on Singapore military planes flying over the country's air space.

But Khatib said that he had told Japanese companies to consider moving their regional headquarters to Malaysia instead.

"I have advised them to move to Malaysia if there are unsure about the future of Malaysia-Singapore relations," he said.

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