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Batam summit helps warm Indonesia, Malaysia relations

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THE talking point was not the outcome of the Mahathir-Habibie summit in Batam last Thursday but the fact that the two leaders met at all.

It was only the second time that the Indonesian President has met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir since his elevation in May last year.

They first met in Kuala Lumpur during the Apec Ministerial meeting.

So, the leaders' summit stirred a great deal of interest, with about 100 journalists converging at the scenic Nongsa Point Marina in Batam to cover the half-day event.

Habibie had apparently asked for the meeting earlier this month to discuss "economic, cultural and political" matters.

But the venue and timing of the summit raised eyebrows.

For one thing, it was also in Batam that Habibie met the daughter of sacked Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Sri Anwar Ibrahim six months ago, ruffling feathers in Kuala Lumpur and resulting in a coolness in bilateral relations.

Indeed, some claim this was also the underlying reason why Malaysia eventually withdrew its US\$1 billion (RM3.8 billion) economic aid package promised to Indonesia.

But the Indonesian leader is trying in earnest not to allow this to sour relations with Malaysia, and more so with Dr Mahathir, whom he referred to as "my senior partner" in Batam.

This perhaps explains why, despite being in the thick of the Indonesian elections and campaign frenzy at home by new presidential hopefuls such as Megawati Sukarnoputri, Amien Rais and Abdulrahman Wahid, Habibie saw it fit to have a meeting with Dr Mahathir.

The timing of the summit further gives credence to the notion that the President is determined to strengthen ties with Malaysia.

This was further manifested by the fact that he had assembled a high-powered ministerial team comprising, among others, Economics, Finance and Industry Minister Ginandjar Kartasasmita, Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, Armed Forces Chief General Wiranto, Industry and Trade Minister Rahadi Ramelan and State Secretary Muladi, for the summit.

Habibie not only embraced Dr Mahathir upon his arrival at the Hang Nadim Batam Airport but also accorded the Prime Minister a warm and traditional welcome.

He also went out of the way to accord the Prime Minister the honour due to a senior statesman, telling journalists at their joint Press conference after the summit that it was only right and proper that Dr Mahathir spoke first as he was "more senior".

When his turn to speak came, Habibie started off by saying that he was very happy and honoured to meet Dr Mahathir and to know that he was in good health.

"This is the most important thing," he said, referring to Dr Mahathir's recent hospitalisation in Kuala Lumpur for a lung infection.

When the foreign Press asked Habibie to elaborate in English on what was discussed during their meeting, Habibie again gave the spotlight to Dr Mahathir, saying "the Prime Minister's English is better than mine".

Simple courtesies like these went a long way in endearing Habibie to Dr Mahathir and his delegation, which included Foreign Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar and Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz.

Acknowledging the compliments, Dr Mahathir told the Press conference

that the meeting had brought the two leaders "closer together", enabling them to better understand the economic and political problems besieging the two countries.

Although he referred to the Indonesian election in his opening remarks, the Prime Minister was careful not to endorse openly any particular party or candidate in the polls.

Instead, he delivered a general message, urging Indonesians to choose a government that would continue to spur growth and development.

"I am personally confident that the polls would be conducted well and that the people of Indonesia, with their strong sense of nationalism," he said, "would choose a government that would bring them much benefit."

This was good enough for Habibie, who obviously stands to gain much political mileage from meeting Dr Mahathir.

More importantly, the summit gave him the chance to correct whatever ill-feelings he might have generated in Malaysia over his support for Anwar.

"Malaysia and Indonesia share the same language and race, and we even share similar physical characteristics," the Indonesian leader said. "That makes us very compatible, which means that it will be easy to work together."

There was no joint communique after the summit. Neither did the two sides announce any concrete political initiatives.

Both leaders only offered hope for greater co-operation.

But journalists covering the event in Batam went home sure of one thing - Habibie knows who his friends are. And Dr Mahathir and Malaysia are top on his list.

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