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Chinese PM on three-day visit from Monday

KOTA TINGGI, Thurs. - Bilateral economic and trade co-operation issues will be the main focus of discussions between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed and visiting Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji.

Foreign Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar said today the two leaders were also expected to exchange views on recent political developments in the region, and the current state of international relations.

Zhu is due to arrive in Malaysia on Monday for a three-day visit.

Syed Hamid added that the visit would also be a beneficial precursor to the Asean informal summit in Manila, to be held from Nov 27 to Nov 29.

"Our two countries have enjoyed close ties, and the scope of important issues of mutual interest is fairly wide.

"China is due to invest in a major paper and pulp project in Sabah, while we also have many investors in China, so economic matters will feature prominently during the visit," he said.

He added that since the visit was a precursor to the Asean informal summit, regional issues such as the Spratly Islands dispute "may or may not be touched upon".

On allegations by the Opposition that Zhu's visit was an election gimmick by the BN to woo Chinese voters, Syed Hamid stressed that the visit had been planned well before the election date was set.

"Prime Minister Zhu is one of the many foreign leaders we have played host to this year. These visits are important in light of the fact that we are about to enter the next century.

"I should think it will be a sad thing if we have to use a foreign party to determine the outcome of our elections.

"Surely the Chinese Prime Minister will not like to be used by anybody," he said.

Local Chinese dailies had earlier quoted MCA president Datuk Seri Ling Liong Sik as denying allegations that the BN had purposely arranged for Zhu's visit at this time, to woo votes from the Chinese community.

Meanwhile, Bernama reports Syed Hamid as saying that Dr Mahathir will not be attending the Asean informal summit in Manila due to the election.

Syed Hamid said Dr Mahathir had been planning to attend the Manila informal summit as it would be Asean's last major meeting for the century.

"It's up to the Prime Minister to decide who will represent Malaysia at the summit," Syed Hamid told reporters after inspecting the Kota Tinggi Barisan Nasional operations room today.

Syed Hamid is the incumbent Member of Parliament for Kota Tinggi.

He said he himself would also not be attending next week's ministerial meeting of Asean's third informal summit.

"Originally, I was scheduled to leave for Manila on Nov 24, but because of the general election, I had to cancel the trip," Syed Hamid said.

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