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Yearender-Foreign
EVENTFUL YEAR ON FOREIGN FRONT

By: E. Sivabalan

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 26 (Bernama) -- While domestic events, especially the November general election grabbed headlines for most of the year, there was never a dull moment on the foreign front for Malaysia either in 1999.

It began right on New Year's Day itself when Malaysia took up a non-permanent seat in the powerful United Nations Security Council and about a week later, Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar walked in as the new Foreign Minister.

But the double excitement was short-lived when in June, Malaysia found itself almost on a head-on collision with the Philippines over the Spratlys issue.

A war of words erupted with the foreign ministries of both countries maintaining they were in the right.

Manila filed a diplomatic protest with Kuala Lumpur over structures it claimed were erected by Malaysia on its territory in the disputed South China Sea atolls. Malaysia maintained they were built on its own territory.

Then, in September, Syed Hamid, a former Defence Minister found himself in the line of fire over a reported meeting with his Israeli counterpart David Levy on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

Syed Hamid strongly denied allegations that it was an official meeting as reported by a Singapore newspaper and maintains that Malaysia does not have diplomatic ties with Israel.

The matter was put to rest after the minister explained that he had used his meeting with Levy to send a strong message to Israel that it must implement its peace accord with Palestine.

Since assuming his post, Syed Hamid has taken upon himself the task of rebuilding Malaysia's image marred by political unrest over the sacking and trial of former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Anwar's sacking on Sept 2, 1998 and the imposition of the selected capital controls a day before had tarnished Malaysia's image internationally.

Syed Hamid embarked on a series of overseas missions, including meeting Malaysian students in a bid to explain the situation in the country in the wake of reports of rising anti-establishment tendencies among them.

The last 12 months witnessed a host of activities in and outside the country ranging from forging relations with newly-elected Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid to the despatch of troops to Malaysia's newest and fragile neighbour -- East Timor.

Kuala Lumpur sent 30 military officers to join the multinational peacekeeping force in the war-torn territory which opted for independence from Indonesia. The government also pledged to send a much larger contingent, also under the UN banner.

The year also saw Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad skipping three major international events.

Dr Mahathir did not attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum summit in New Zealand due to "heavy domestic schedule" while he had to skip the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in South Africa following the dissolution of Parliament.

He also skipped the Asean Informal Summit in Manila as it was held in between the dissolution of Parliament and the November general election.

Despite his absence, Dr Mahathir's voice continued to be heard through

Syed Hamid in these forums.

The prime minister did however attend some international forums such as the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January, the Group of 15 developing nations meeting in Jamaica in February, the second summit of the Group of Eight Islamic developing countries in Bangladesh in March and the 3rd South Africa International Dialogue in Zimbabwe in October.

It was at the East Asia Economic Summit in Singapore last October where the prime minister proposed the setting up of the East Asia Monetary Fund.

Dr Mahathir also made trips to several countries including the United States, China and the Russian Republic of Buryatia.

He was also in New York in September to address the 54th UN General Assembly and met with UN secretary-general Kofi Annan.

Many foreign leaders also visited Malaysia. They included Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, Indonesia's President Abdurrahman Wahid, Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, Palestine President Yasser Arafat, Venezuela President Hugo Rafael Chavez Frias, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and Iraqi vice-president Taha Yassin Ramadhan.

The year also saw many southern African leaders in Malaysia to attend the Langkawi International Dialogue in July.

The foreign front is also expected to be a hive of activity for Malaysia come 2000 what more with the reappointment of Syed Hamid as the foreign minister in the new Cabinet following the general election.

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