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Indons feel problems can be resolved through talks

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INDONESIA'S new leadership is of the view that any problems that arise between Malaysia and Indonesia can be resolved through negotiations, without having to refer to a third party.

This was conveyed by Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during their meeting in Putrajaya on Saturday.

Commenting on the outcome of the first meeting between the two leaders after Abdurrahman was chosen as Indonesia's fourth president on October 20, replacing B.J. Habibie, Dr Mahathir said:

"We found that in terms of bilateral relations, there are not many changes, except that they (Indonesia) feel that any problem between Malaysia and Indonesia can be resolved through negotiations without referring to a third party."

The Prime Minister was speaking at a news conference at a Deepavali open house hosted by Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. He, however, did not specify the bilateral problems faced by both countries.

On-going disputes between the two countries include overlapping claims over Pulau Ligitan and Pulau Sipadan in the South China Sea. Both countries have brought their claims to the International Court of Justice. Dr Mahathir said his meeting with Abdurrahman, who is popularly known as Gus Dur, is to "touch base" because Malaysia wanted to get to know the new Indonesian Government better.

Gus Dur, who is on a four-day tour of eight South-East Asian countries, left for Myanmar yesterday morning.

On Indonesia's request for additional credit to purchase rice, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia is prepared to extend the credit.

"We have already sent one shipment worth about US\$50 million, but they need more. We are quite prepared to extend more credit to them ... it's helping a neighbour," the Prime Minister said.

Asked if Malaysia will take more workers from Indonesia to ease unemployment in the republic, Dr Mahathir said the Government will do that if there is a need, but at present there are enough workers in the country.

Briefing reporters after a meeting of Malaysian and Indonesian officials on Saturday, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said Indonesia has requested US\$200 million (US\$1 = RM3.80) in addition to a US\$100 million credit line extended to it by Petronas to purchase rice. Syed Hamid said Dr Mahathir spoke on the East Asia Monetary Fund, to which Gus Dur said his country welcomes anything that benefits the region. Dr Mahathir also suggested the establishment of a bilateral payment arrangement to enhance trade relations between both countries.

Other issues discussed during their hour-long meeting include political and economic developments, investment, trade, Association of South-East Asian Nations affairs and areas for consultation.

The meeting was also attended by Syed Hamid's Indonesian counterpart, Mr Alwi Shihab.

AFP reports: Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid cranked up the pace of his South-East Asian tour yesterday, stopping in Yangon and Bangkok, but decided against meeting with Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Abdurrahman met Myanmar's Senior General Than Shwe and Foreign Minister Win Aung after flying into Yangon from Malaysia. He then headed to Bangkok, and talks with Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai dominated by the future of East Timor.

Abdurrahman told reporters before leaving Yangon he decided not to visit opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi out of respect for the wishes of Myanmar's ruling generals.

After his brief visit to Myanmar, conducted amid tight security, the Indonesian President flew to neighbouring Thailand and held talks with Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai.

Thai government spokesman Akapol Sorasuchart said Abdurrahman asked Chuan to support any bid by ravaged East Timor for membership of Asean.

"The Indonesian President has asked Thailand to support East Timor if it wants to join Asean," Akapol said.

"The Thai Prime Minister said Thailand cannot judge this alone, we will talk about this issue when it is time."

(END)