

08 MAY 1999

Iraq-Visit

IRAQI VICE-PRESIDENT'S VISIT SET TO BOOST TIES

By: R. Ravichandran

KUALA LUMPUR, May 8 (Bernama) -- The four-day visit by Iraqi Vice-President Taha Yasseen Ramadhan to Malaysia beginning tomorrow is set to strengthen the long-standing ties between the two countries, especially at a time when Baghdad is trying hard to get the nine-year-old United Nations sanctions on it lifted.

Taha, 60, is the highest ranking Iraqi leader to visit Malaysia since Kuala Lumpur and Baghdad established diplomatic ties about 35 years ago. He is making the visit at the invitation of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi,

A vice-president since March 1991, Taha is also a member of the Revolutionary Command Council, Iraq's top decision-making body.

Iraq Ambassador to Malaysia Adnan Malik Al-Ghazali said besides strengthening relations, the visit was also to exchange views on international issues, especially on resolutions on Iraq in the United Nations (UN) Security Council and the sanctions.

"The whole scope of Iraqi-Malaysian relationship will be discussed. All details of the relationship will be on the table. It will be an open discussion," he told Bernama in an interview here.

Taha will call on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah, and attend a meeting with Malaysian businessmen and a dinner hosted by Petronas.

Adnan said Malaysia had been very vocal in the UN and the Security Council as a non-permanent member and through coordination with other countries to pressure for the lifting of the sanctions, which have devastated the economy of the oil-rich state of 22 million people.

"We highly depend on the positive role in the council that is being played in order to lift the sanctions. So (during the visit) we will have some dialogue on what the best means are to do that," he said.

Iraq was slapped with the crippling sanctions following its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Since then, it has been the target of several air strikes by the US and Britain, attacks which brought condemnation, including from Malaysia.

Describing the current relations as "very good", Adnan said Taha's visit would surely benefit Malaysia-Iraq relations in the long term.

"We understand Malaysia's position to abide by the UN resolutions. Despite all that, they have spared no efforts to help and assist Iraq in many ways within the framework of these resolutions," said Adnan who took up his post last month.

He was referring to resolutions that, among other things, demanded for the disclosure and destruction of all stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction.

Asked whether Taha would be bringing any message from President Saddam Hussein, he said: "The President has asked him to come and see Dr Mahathir and Abdullah, and I am sure there should be a message from the President to the Malaysian government."

On the economic side, the participation of Malaysian companies in the UN-approved oil-for-food programme is also expected to be discussed. Malaysia is now in third position after Russia and China from among 40 countries involved in the programme.

"Malaysia has been given an important portion of that programme. And we hope we will try to increase this range of relations between Malaysian

companies and Iraq," he said.

In line with the oil-for-goods deal started at the end of 1996, Iraq is now allowed to export US\$5.2 billion worth of oil every six months in exchange for badly needed food and medicine.

Up to June last year, Malaysian companies have traded goods worth US\$140 million under the programme, mainly vegetable ghee and medicines bought by the Iraqi government.

Malaysia has twice extended credit facilities totalling more than RM160 million to Iraq to buy palm oil. Malaysia also trained Iraqis in technical and public service sectors.

Adnan said Malaysian companies would be very much welcome to take part in Iraq's reconstruction in the field of infrastructural development, agriculture, petroleum and industries once the sanctions are lifted.

"The Iraqi government has a high respect for Malaysia. And we highly appreciate the stand of Malaysian people who go to the streets in support of Iraq, and I think this will help to provide a positive reflection in any future dealing between Iraq and Malaysia," he said.

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