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Mahathir-Ties

MAHATHIR PROPOSES MORE OUTWARD LOOKING SINO-M'SIA TIES

By: Ali Mamat

BEIJING, Aug 19 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today proposed that the close Sino-Malaysia ties, which had been elevated to that of "partnership", be more outward-looking so as to involve the region which continues to be better integrated year by year.

He said that just as Malaysia and China took the bold step 25 years ago (by establishing diplomatic relations) to change the situation between China and Southeast Asia, the partnership should now embark on a new era-setting endeavour for the region.

"The financial and economic crisis that struck our region during the last two years of the century has warned us clearly that there are major challenges that China and Malaysia, and other regional countries, have to meet in the 21st century," he said.

Dr Mahathir was delivering a key-note address "Malaysia and China Relations: Challenges and Opportunities in the 21st Century" at the Third Malaysia-China Forum, here.

He emphasized that in the wake of financial turmoil and economic crisis that hit the region, there was now a need for both Malaysia and China to work together as well with the neighbours to ensure solid economic recovery for East Asia.

He recalled that since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1974, a lot had changed for China and Malaysia and the region of East Asia.

"Since then, China's relations with Malaysia and Asean have been vastly different compared to the pre-1974 era. The bold step taken by our two countries paved the way for new directions for China-Southeast Asia ties for the last quarter of this century," he said.

On Malaysia-China bilateral relations, Dr Mahathir said the many important trade and investment agreements between them had helped propel the economic linkages of the two countries forward.

"We did not allow our different political and social system to obstruct our relationship, but instead we focused on what could bring us closer," he said.

Indeed, he said, a sure sign of closer relations between the two countries was that of people-to-people exchanges.

Before this decade, very few Chinese visited Malaysia.

However, by 1996, the figure totalled 135,743 and this grew to 158,679 the following year.

"Likewise, from a few thousand at the beginning of this decade, the number of visa applications by Malaysians to visit China increased to 205,000 in 1996 and 239,000 in 1997," he said.

In a lighter tone, the prime minister jested that he felt very much at home when in China because "unlike going to other part of the world, including to nearby Indonesia or Thailand, I did not have to adjust my watch."

Despite the long distance between the two countries, China and Malaysia both have the same time zone.

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