

17 JUN 1999

Hearing

US-MALAYSIA TIES EXCELLENT DESPITE RHETORIC

By: Salmy Hashim

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Bernama) -- A senior Clinton administration official Wednesday described United States-Malaysia bilateral relations as "excellent" despite the sharp rhetoric exchanged by leaders of the two countries.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Ralph Boyce said at a Congressional Sub-Committee hearing on "Malaysia: Assessing the Mahathir Agenda," said there was little change in US-Malaysia cooperation in trade, commerce, diplomatic and security affairs as Malaysia still sought constructive relations with the US.

"Nevertheless, overblown rhetoric that incorrectly characterises US intentions does harm to our mutual interests," he told members of the US House Sub-Committee on Asia and the Pacific.

Boyce, who was in Kuala Lumpur about two weeks ago, said most observers believed that the governing Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would probably hold on to a sizeable majority in the next general election due anytime before April next year.

"We hope and expect that the Malaysian people ... will select a government through established democratic procedures which reflects the popular will," said Boyce.

Boyce also reiterated the US government concern about;

\* the independence and impartiality of Malaysia's judiciary with regards to the case of former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim;

\* the independence and professionalism of the police force; and

\* the freedom of assembly and press.

He said these had hurt the opposition's ability to compete with the ruling coalition.

Sub-Committee chairman Doug Bereuter, when asked why Malaysia merited a hearing, said it was to educate the American public and let the Malaysian government know "that we're interested and we're watching events."

The one-and-the half hour hearing was poorly-attended and only three out of 21 members of the sub-committee were present.

There were a lot of confusion surrounding the hearing, the room and time were changed at least three times prior to the meeting, while the list of witnesses was also not determined until the last minute.

Even the theme of the hearing was changed from "Malaysia Under the Leadership of Mahathir Mohamad" to a more negative tone: "Malaysia: Assessing the Mahathir Agenda."

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Stanley Roth was scheduled to speak on behalf of the administration, but Boyce turned up instead.

The four congressmen took turns to ask the three witnesses -- Boyce; Douglas Paal, president of the Asia Pacific Policy Center and Dr Linda Lim, a Singaporean teaching at the University of Michigan Business School.

They were posed questions on;

\* Malaysia's currency controls;

\* opposition party Keadilan led by Anwar's wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail;

\* Malaysia's strained relations with Singapore; and

\* Malaysia's treatment of hogs infected by the JE virus.

An American observer who attended the hearing characterised the proceeding as a "kangaroo court out to get Malaysia and Mahathir."

Malaysia's Ambassador to the US, Datuk Ghazzali Sheikh Khalid, who did not attend the hearing when asked at his office, said: "If they call it an educational process, then you begin to wonder whether that purpose is being served by having so-called experts, who are blatantly biased and ill-informed, appear before the committee."

Ghazzali said Paal's views "cuts no ice at all" as he had admitted that his centre had collaborated with Anwar and had benefited from donations from Anwar and his associates.

"As far as I'm concerned, Paal has no credibility and we should not take his views seriously. After all he who pays the piper calls the tune."

As for Lim, who repeatedly downplayed the role played by currency and capital control measures in Malaysia's economic recovery during the hearing, Ghazzali said that he found the views of the so-called economic expert at odds with the current reality in Malaysia.

"She does not seem to appreciate the circumstances under which capital controls were put in place in Malaysia and the positive impact it has had on our economic recovery," the ambassador said.

Paal said that over the past decade and a half, Malaysia has had running spats with the United States, Singapore, Britain, Australia, the Philippines and others.

"All these have had sizeable roles in the ebb and flow of Malaysian politics. Often, Dr Mahathir has ridden these controversies, or even started them, to move events in his direction," Paal said.

Paal, who is seeking sponsorship from another country to run his show, recommended to the members of Congress that the US maintain a correct but cool relationship with the Mahathir government.

-- BERNAMA

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