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Gusmao's visit seen improving bilateral ties and fostering greater understanding

PUTRAJAYA, Tues. - Malaysia and East Timor look set for warm bilateral ties in the years ahead following East Timorese leader Xanana Gusmao's official visit here, said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

Today's meeting between Gusmao and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has widened avenues for Kuala Lumpur and Dili to establish bilateral ties, Bernama reported.

Gusmao's visit has brought about greater understanding of Malaysia for the East Timorese leader, Syed Hamid said, when briefing reporters on the outcome of the 40-minute meeting at the Prime Minister's Office here.

When he was asked whether Gusmao's visit enabled Malaysia to explain its stand and role towards East Timor, he said: "The important thing today is that we no longer take them (East Timor leaders) as not understanding Malaysia well."

The question was in light of Gusmao's earlier perception of Malaysia's pro-Jakarta stance after East Timor voted for independence from Indonesia in last August's referendum.

Syed Hamid said: "We look at the matter as over with. We want to forge ahead towards regional and bilateral relations and we believe the East Timor government will be in place within two or three years."

This is the first meeting with Dr Mahathir for Gusmao, who is president of the National Council for Timorese Resistance (NCTR) and the most likely first President of independent East Timor.

Syed Hamid and NCTR Vice President and Nobel peace prize winner, Jose Ramos-Horta were also present at the meeting.

Gusmao and Ramos-Horta are here on a three-day visit as part of an Asian tour to gain support for the reconstruction of the ravaged territory.

They had earlier visited China, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines.

Syed Hamid said Gusmao and his delegation showed keen interest in Malaysia's achievements and praised Dr Mahathir for his contributions.

At the meeting Dr Mahathir offered East Timor assistance in human resource development and Malaysian expertise in gas and petroleum production as well as in training an efficient civil service, Syed Hamid said.

"We are willing to provide East Timor with whatever assistance within our means and capabilities. I think now we have to work out the details," Syed Hamid said.

Syed Hamid said Gusmao also expressed East Timor's willingness to emulate Malaysia's development formula.

"I think what Gusmao wanted is the formula of Malaysia's success," Syed Hamid said.

Dr Mahathir told the East Timorese delegation that Malaysia's success was due to the continuity of the government, political stability and racial harmony which also contributed to economic growth, Syed Hamid said.

The delegation members were also impressed with the Federal administrative centre of Putra Jaya, Syed Hamid said.

According to Syed Hamid, the Prime Minister also expressed Malaysia's willingness to explore investment opportunities in East Timor. Gusmao also invited Malaysian investors to venture there, he added.

Earlier, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said Gusmao had

proposed that Malaysia be given the opportunity to command the peacekeeping force in East Timor under a rotation system of leadership.

Speaking after Gusmao's courtesy call at the Defence Ministry, Najib said, Gusmao told him that he (Gusmao) would raise the matter with the UN.

He said Gusmao also told him that it was the Philippines which had actually made the suggestion that the leadership of the peacekeeping force be rotated among Asean nations.

Najib said that if the UN is all for the proposal, Malaysia may stand a chance of commanding the peacekeeping force.

Najib said Gusmao also wished that Malaysia would expand its participation in East Timor and was prepared to approach UN secretary-general Kofi Annan on the matter.

"Gusmao said an expanded Malaysian participation would aid the process of reconstruction, like building schools and bridges, and this would increase the confidence of the people there after the traumatic experience they went through," Najib said. He added that the Cabinet would decide on the matter.

The East Timorese overwhelmingly voted for independence from Indonesia in a United Nations-organised referendum on Aug 30 last year. Indonesia had annexed the former Portuguese colony in the 1970s.