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Howard-Malaysia

MALAYSIA IMPORTANT TO AUSTRALIA, SAYS JOHN HOWARD

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 6 (Bernama) -- Australian Prime Minister John Howard said Canberra views its ties with Kuala Lumpur as important but stressed that Australia and Malaysia can only have a sound relationship based on mutual respect.

"I've always said in foreign affairs you can only have a sound relationship if it is based on mutual respect," he said in an interview with an Australian radio station in Canberra today.

He was asked if sensitivities with Jakarta and in particular with Malaysia, have added tensions in the region. The transcript of the interview was obtained by Bernama.

Howard said it was fair to say that he had been subjected to criticism by the Malaysian Prime Minister as was his predecessor.

"On the other hand, the people to people links between Australia and Malaysia, the business links, the long term cultural links are very strong," said Howard.

"So I take a longer view of the relationship that Australia has with each of those two countries (Malaysia and Indonesia)," he said.

Australia and Malaysia have had hiccups in their relationship over many issues. Last June 21, visiting Secretary to the Australian Cabinet Paul McClintock was quoted as saying in Kuala Lumpur that he was concerned with the political rift between Howard and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Greg Sheridan, the foreign editor of "The Australian" newspaper who interviewed Dr Mahathir in Kuala Lumpur recently, wrote that Dr Mahathir seemed annoyed by Howard's switch from a friendly to a critical attitude.

"Initially, of course, he (Howard) wanted to be friendly and I was open," Dr Mahathir was quoted as saying in reaction to Howard's earlier comments describing the jailing of former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as a reversion to authoritarianism.

Asked if Australia was being "black balled" by Malaysia and Indonesia from getting membership in the so-called Asean plus three (Japan, China and South Korea) trade bloc, Howard said: "Well at the present time, we're not being invited to join it but of course things can change and in the meantime we are pushing other options."

Asked if it would damage Australia's economic interests, Howard said: "I don't know that in the short term it damages them and in the long term things might change."

"You've always got to keep flexibility, you've always got to take a long view, and in the meantime grab hold of other opportunities," he said.

Citing an example, Howard said Australia was negotiating a free trade agreement now with Singapore.

"We are open to other free trade arrangements which are consistent with our long-term multilateral trade aims," he said.

Howard said he has sought to see Australia having linkages not only with the Asia Pacific "which is tremendously important to us", but also with Europe and North America.

"I've sought successfully, I believe, to re-balance our foreign relations so that we are not seen as exclusively concerned with one part of the world because that is not in the best interests of Australia," he added.

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