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Syed Hamid-Chechnya

MALAYSIA REGARDS CHECHNYA ISSUE RUSSIA'S INTERNAL MATTER - SYED HAMID

KUALA LUMPUR, June 12 (Bernama) -- Malaysia has always regarded the Chechnya conflict as Russia's domestic problem, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said today.

He said although Kuala Lumpur had always conveyed this view to the Russian leadership, it nevertheless wished to see the protracted conflict resolved through negotiations to put an end to the sufferings of the Chechens.

Syed Hamid said this when asked to comment on the request by Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to mediate in getting Russia and Chechnya to start negotiations to end the conflict in Chechnya.

In an exclusive interview with Bernama from his mountain hideout in Chechnya yesterday, Maskhadov said he would be grateful to Dr Mahathir if he could bring the warring factions to start the negotiation process.

"We wish to thank the Chechen leader for his confidence on us and at the same time, we will not stop to speak up on the need to respect Russia's sovereignty," he told reporters after meeting his Vietnamese counterpart Nguyen Dy Nien at Wisma Putra, here.

Some 26,000 Chechens had been killed in the protracted conflict which started in 1994 following moves to secede Chechnya from the Russian Federation.

Syed Hamid also said some 150 Malaysians in the Solomon Islands, which is embroiled in a political crisis, are expected to be evacuated once the situation becomes clearer.

He said the government need to take into account the prevailing situation in the Pacific Island nation and other factors before making a final decision on the evacuation.

"... we have received a message from the Solomon Islands that they do not want Malaysians to return home now as majority of them are investors and workers. When the situation becomes clearer, we can consider bringing them back," he said.

Twenty Malaysian companies are operating in the Solomon Islands, many of which are engaged in the logging and plantation sectors.

Syed Hamid said while the government was closely monitoring developments in that country, it was also making preparations to evacuate Malaysians.

He said his ministry would liaise with the Defence Ministry to execute the evacuation exercise.

The Solomon Islands slipped into civil strife when the Malaita Eagle Force kidnapped Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu and took control of key government installations on Monday.

Ulufa'alu, who was released five days ago, faces a parliamentary no-confidence vote later this week.

Syed Hamid also said the death of Syrian president Hafez Al-Assad would not affect the ongoing West Asian peace process as the leaders in the region wanted lasting peace.

He said Malaysia was confident that Hafez's successor would not only safeguard his country's interests but also ensure the success of the peace initiatives.

Hafez's son Bashar, 34, is expected to succeed his father as Syrian president. The 69-year-old Hafez died on Saturday of a heart failure following a stroke a few weeks ago.

In paying tribute to Hafez, Syed Hamid said the late president, who was

in power for 30 years, was a key figure in West Asia and played a crucial role in the peace process.

His death was a big lost to Syria, the people and the region, he added.

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