

18 OCT 2000

Malaysia-Indonesia (News Focus)

MALAYSIA-INDONESIA ENHANCE BILATERAL TIES

By: Ahmad Zukiman Zain

LANGKAWI, Oct 18 (Bernama) -- This island of the legend of Mahsuri, the slandered maiden who was impaled to death by royal command, was the setting for a yet another historic episode this week.

Under the tranquil backdrop of a lush green seaside resort, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid yesterday kept their commitment to meet every six months to bolster Kuala Lumpur-Jakarta ties.

Despite the informal setting, the leaders covered wide-ranging issues from the deportation of unemployed illegal Indonesian immigrants from Malaysia to cooperation in oil and gas exploration and promoting Indonesia's Batam island as an Asean City.

On the global front, they echoed world concern over escalating violence in West Asia calling for a halt in Israeli use of force against Palestinians and urging both sides to resume peace negotiations.

Foreign Ministry Deputy Secretary-General Datuk Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak said their meeting could complement the Joint Consultative Meeting (JCM) held by officials of both countries.

"Despite the short period of stay, they had used their quality time to discuss various issues," Ahmad Fuzi told Bernama at the airport here today to bid farewell to Abdurrahman who left for Hong Kong enroute to Seoul to attend the third Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM).

Wimar Witoelar, spokesman of the Indonesian President, agreed that the meeting had been a success, producing significant results.

"The ambience was very comfortable, it was very casual and the leaders were so relaxed (to discuss matters)," he told Bernama in an interview.

The situation was conducive to discussing, if not settling, pertinent issues like the security, social and economic problems posed by Indonesian illegal immigrants seeking employment in Malaysia but ending up jobless.

"Oh yes, there has always been a problem, now let's sit down together to discuss," said Wimar.

Indonesia has agreed to jointly bear the cost of deporting illegal Indonesian immigrants from Malaysia.

Its Manpower and Transmigration Minister Alhilal Hamdi said authorities have constantly discouraged Indonesians from entering Malaysia, or other countries, illegally in search for jobs.

"As a short-term measure we've asked provincial authorities where most of these workers come to improve exit procedures so that these people would choose employment opportunities through legal and less bureaucratic means," he told Bernama.

Another significant outcome of the meeting was Indonesia's keenness to learn from Malaysia's experience in opening and managing free trade zones.

Abdurrahman told a press conference after the meeting yesterday that Indonesia felt compelled to learn from the successful implementation of such zones in Langkawi and Labuan.

Emulating Malaysia's free trade zones would be useful to Indonesia's effort in promoting Batam as an Asean city, an idea still in the formative stage, said the newly-appointed presidential spokesman.

"There's so many aspects that could be learned such as the creation of an independent authority...of course, the model will be different in the end but many components could be similar," he said.

As for the former television talk-show host, who took up the post of presidential spokesman just nine days ago, accompanying Abdurrahman to Malaysia was his first and understandably memorable trip overseas in his new capacity.

"Langkawi is a very pleasant place," he said and such a remark augured

well for Langkawi's aspiration to become a convention centre cum tourist destination of world reckoning.

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