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US-Malaysia

US-MALAYSIA RELATIONS CHILLY BUT NOT FROZEN- US OFFICIAL

By: Salmy Hashim

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Bernama) -- Washington-Kuala Lumpur ties may be chilly at present but not frozen, a United States official said.

The official who asked not to be named said that relations between the two countries "have not gone down the tubes" because "our business and economic relationships are good while our military cooperation is strong"

"There is chill in the air, but the water is not frozen."

"What is not good at present is the broad political relationship," he said.

The official said that exchange of visits between high-ranking officials of the two countries, for instance, would not be likely till the end of the Clinton administration in January next year.

U.S. Defence Secretary Richard Cohen departed for Asia on Wednesday in a trip that will include Hong Kong, Vietnam, Japan and Korea.

The official was asked to clarify a comment made by Assistant Secretary of State of East Asia and Pacific Affairs Stanley Roth, who said in Hong Kong late last week that "until there is a change in the policies, it is difficult to envisage a warmer relationship between the United State and Malaysia."

Roth cited what he claimed the Malaysian government's recent crackdown against the Opposition and trial of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as indicators of the country's worsening human rights situation and a weakening respect for the rule of law.

Roth said it was difficult to understand why the crackdown had continued even after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Barisan Nasional won the November 29 general election.

The official said Washington does not regard Dr Mahathir as a dictator or another "Pinochet" (former Chilean President) but views with concern the Prime Minister's "heavy-handed way of dealing with Anwar, the opposition during the elections, the press and the judiciary."

"What happened in Malaysia over the last 18 months is not a government that they (the Clinton administration) would want to associate with," he added.

-- BERNAMA

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