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Malaysia-Singapore

ABDULLAH'S GOODWILL MISSION BOOSTS MALAYSIA-SINGAPORE TIES

By: Tham Choy Lin

SINGAPORE, Feb 10 (Bernama) -- For several hours yesterday after his visit was officially over, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was still in Singapore.

Having spent the last three days meeting Singapore leaders and attending dinners by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Abdullah had stayed back to hold a dinner for his old friends before flying home.

The cosy setting of Rumah Malaysia, the official residence of the Malaysian High Commissioner to Singapore, was filled with much banter as Abdullah and his wife, Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, entertained about a dozen guests which included former Singapore president Ong Teng Cheong, ex-Cabinet minister Lim Chee Onn and current Keppel Corporation chairman as well as former Member of Parliament Mansor Sukaimi.

Rounding up dinner with durians brought in from Malaysia's Segamat town, Abdullah, or Pak Lah as he is favouritely called, again stressed to Malaysian journalists present the importance of maintaining contacts between both sides of the Causeway especially among young political leaders and students.

He spoke enthusiastically of bringing together the youth from the two countries by using the Internet for twinning schools and video-conferencing and later expanding the network to other countries in Southeast Asia.

"We are aware relations will always have some hiccups, even in future but the most important thing is that there must a higher percentage of Malaysians and Singaporeans who would understand and voice their opinion that bilateral relations between Malaysia and Singapore are very important and should not be adversely affected.

"If there are differences between certain groups, we would like them to be resolved as quickly as possible," said Abdullah at a news conference to wrap up his trip.

Abdullah's trip, his first since becoming Malaysia's number two, is seen to have soothe bilateral ties which took another knock just last month when Goh sparked outrage in Malaysia when he said that Singapore Malays were better off than their Malaysian counterparts.

Ties between the two countries have always been prickly. A package of outstanding issues, which includes a crucial new water supply contract for Singapore, has also weighed on the relationship for the past two years.

But there are encouraging signs that the two countries are moving forward on the contentious package that has stalled over the past year.

During Abdullah's visit, it was revealed that the two countries would now look into the relocation of the Malaysian-owned railway station in Tanjung Pagar here to Kranji, also within Singapore, instead of Bukit Timah or Woodlands as discussed before, and linking the proposed Kranji station to Malaysia's Johor state with an underground rail tunnel.

Malaysia's Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said negotiations on the package were moving in the right direction after Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's trip to Kuala Lumpur last August during which he met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Syed Hamid also stressed that the package would be resolved on a "win-win" basis, on terms satisfiable to both sides, and there was no question of one granting concession to the other.

"Once the general framework has been agreed, it is not a question of

Singapore giving concession or Malaysia delaying it. Malaysia is as much interested as Singapore to have all these matters under the bridge," he said.

An immediate positive result coming out of Abdullah's trip is that the two countries would work on a common electronic immigration clearance for frequent travellers of the two countries via Johor.

Singapore's Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng will be visiting Kuala Lumpur soon on the matter.

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