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Abdullah-Singapore

ABDULLAH'S VISIT TO BOOST TIES

By: Tham Choy Lin

SINGAPORE, Feb 6 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi arrives here tomorrow for a three-day working visit with the dust still settling on yet another spat between the two countries.

Abdullah's trip, his first since he took over as the country's number two in early 1999, comes at a testy time after Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said Malays on the island-state were better off than their Malaysian counterparts.

The comparison outraged political leaders and non-governmental organisations in Malaysia, many calling Goh's remarks "unfair". The episode culminated in the Malaysian Foreign Ministry summoning Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia, S.Kesavapany.

Thus, there is much anticipation that Abdullah's visit will give a steadying nudge to the often prickly relationship, and to boost contacts especially between younger leaders of the two countries.

He will be bringing a big delegation comprising state and youth leaders from Malaysia's multi-ethnic communities.

For many, it will also be an opportunity to gauge up close the man whom Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had picked as his successor.

Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) chairman Simon Tay, a nominated Member of Parliament, viewed Abdullah's visit as an important one because it would be the first high-level visit from across the Causeway after Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's trip to Malaysia last August.

"It comes at a time, obviously, there are some difficulties going around, and both governments are clearly trying very hard to keep a long-term perspective and to keep ties on an even keel. It has never been easy for Singapore and Malaysia," he said when contacted.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar, who will accompany Abdullah, had said that bilateral relations with Singapore were "too enduring and resilient" to be affected by hiccups.

In an interview with Singapore's Straits Times this week, Syed Hamid said the long-term ties would ultimately be shaped by, among others, the shared history of the two countries, the reality of having to live side by side and family ties between their peoples.

Attention will also focus on whether the two countries can move forward on a package of outstanding bilateral issues that had remained on the negotiating table for the past two years.

Lee's visit to Kuala Lumpur had fanned optimism that the two countries would move closer to resolving the outstanding issues that include a new water supply pact for Singapore and the relocation of a Malaysian immigration checkpoint in the Malaysian-owned Tanjung Pagar railway station here.

Abdullah is scheduled to meet Goh, Senior Minister Lee and deputy prime ministers Lee Hsien Loong and Tony Tan.

He is also slated to speak on "Democratic Transitions in Southeast Asia" and take questions from the floor at a forum organised by SIIA.

Tay said Abdullah, who served as Foreign Minister from 1991 to 1999, had been a leading figure in many developments in Asean, including the admission of new and non-democratic members.

"Currently, as DPM and Minister for Home Affairs, he has been seen as a balanced and moderate leader in Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society," he said.

Abdullah's delegation also includes Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein who is Umno Youth head, Local Government and Housing Minister Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting who is MCA vice-president, Deputy International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Kerk Choo Ting who is Gerakan deputy president and Health Parliamentary Secretary S.Sothinathan who is MIC secretary-general.

State leaders in the delegation are Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Seri Osu Sukam, Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob and Melaka Chief Minister Datuk Wira Mohamed Ali Rustam.

-- BERNAMA

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