

13 MAY 2001

Castro-Wrap Up

HAVANA-KL TIES ON SOLID FOOTING AFTER CASTRO'S VISIT

KUALA LUMPUR, May 13 (Bernama) -- Cuban President Fidel Castro stood in front of the "Cubana" aircraft door, saluted and then placed his right hand on the chest signifying a heartfelt gratitude before disappearing inside the plane, thus ending his three-day visit to Malaysia today.

The visit seems to have further enhanced ties between Havana and Kuala Lumpur, judging from the closeness that was evident throughout the visit between Castro and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Both are trying to develop their respective countries and more importantly, the two leaders share a common distaste of attempts by the West to impose itself on developing countries through means such as globalization.

The white-bearded Castro illustrated this while giving a public lecture Friday on the topic of globalization when he told the audience that the proposed free trade area of the Americas, if materialized, was tantamount to the annexation of poor Latin American countries to the powerful US.

Castro's aversion to the US is understandable given the political hostilities between Havana and Washington which go back to the early 1960s, compounded by the trade embargo imposed by the US on socialist Cuba to undermine support for him.

His defiance towards the US was clearly visible when he challenged a small group of journalists who ambushed him after the lecture to name any other country that was not dependent on the US for survival.

He said: "We are the only country in the world which can live without having trade with the US...trade, loans or anything. We are a poor nation, we are not an oil producing nation.

"However, we have a freedom that no one else has today, the freedom to express our sentiments and to present our truth to others without any fear whatsoever. So, we should be grateful to the US for having given us the privilege of so much freedom that we enjoy."

Castro, 74, claimed power in 1959 following the Cuban Revolution, an armed revolt that overthrew the dictatorship of General Fulgencio Batista.

He also expressed admiration of Dr Mahathir's courage to "rebel" against an unjust international system as he endeavoured to bring Malaysia forward.

"Latin America needs this kind of spirit of rebelliousness if we are to achieve progress," he said.

At the start of the visit Friday, Castro said the trip to Malaysia enabled him to fulfil an old wish to know this country and its people.

During the visit, Cuba expressed its intention to foster closer cooperation with Malaysia in the fields of agriculture, medicine, research and tourism.

Kuala Lumpur and Havana also signed an economic, scientific and cultural agreement that provides the framework for enhanced bilateral relations.

Malaysia also agreed to extend credit facilities by another US\$15 million (RM57 million) to Cuba to purchase palm oil.

The Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah granted Castro an audience before hosting a state banquet for the visiting president at the Istana Negara Friday night.

Given Castro's numerous brushes with assassination attempts, security was understandably tight for the president who brought along with him about

50 Cuban security personnel.

According to a senior Malaysian police officer who wished to remain anonymous, the security arrangement for Castro was the tightest ever for any foreign dignitary since Kuala Lumpur played host to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum in 1998.

"This was the request from Cuban authorities and we were merely collaborating with them to ensure that the security was tight and secure during the visit," he said, adding that a Cuba Airlines (Cubana) flight carrying members of the Cuban security personnel arrived a few days earlier than the actual arrival of Castro early on Friday.

The latest attempt on Castro's life was made at the Ibero-American summit of Spanish and Portuguese-speaking nations in Panama in 1999.

But security concern did not prevent Castro from enjoying his trip here as he ascended the world's tallest twin structures, the Petronas Twin Towers yesterday before surprising everybody by mingling with locals and foreign tourists there.

Castro's delight with Putrajaya where he held discussions with Dr Mahathir was evident when he asked a couple from Australia if they had visited Malaysia's new administrative capital.

When they replied in the negative, he said through an interpreter: "You should visit Putrajaya, it is a very beautiful city."

An American lady staying at the same hotel as Castro learned about his presence when he and Dr Mahathir appeared at the hotel lobby before departing for Putrajaya for bilateral talks.

She was overheard as saying: "Not only did I get to see Malaysia's Prime Minister Dr Mahathir, they also threw in Fidel Castro. What a memorable visit!"

-- BERNAMA

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