

01/08/2001

`US-Malaysia military exercises not abnormal'

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Joint military exercises by Malaysia and the United States were "not abnormal" as they were between two friendly countries to enable them to gain more professionalism and to create better understanding, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said today.

It was also to gain new experiences and expertise.

"The fact that you have exercises does not mean you surrender your sovereignty or have changed your foreign policy. We have an agreement with them as much as we have an agreement under the Five-Power Defence Arrangement. We also conduct joint exercises with Asean countries," Syed Hamid said.

He said this when asked to comment about criticism by the Pas newsletter Harakah, which in its latest issue (Aug 1-15), gives front-page prominence and noted its aversion to US troops landing in parts of Peninsular Malaysia during a joint training mission, dubbed Exercise Carat 2001, on July 16-24.

Syed Hamid said the exercise were part of on-going activities and were routine matters.

"There are American bases in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Does it cease them from being Arab or Islamic countries?" he said after a meeting with Yemen's Foreign Minister Dr Abubakar Al-Kirbi at Wisma Putra here.

Syed Hamid said Pas' views were shallow and showed their lack of understanding on international matters and of the country's strategic interests.

Syed Hamid was also asked about US Secretary of State Colin Powell's alleged statements that any meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and US President George W. Bush depended on three issues.

The three were the Government's treatment of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, its handling of the Opposition and delays in the release of foreign news publications for circulation in Malaysia.

Syed Hamid said there was a very good meeting recently with Powell and Steve Hadley, deputy director of the US National Security Council.

"Malaysia conducts its own foreign policy and we look after our own interests. Nobody would try to tell us how we should govern our country and what are our strategic interests.

"So we will continue to have bilateral relations on the basis of two sovereign states, the US and ourselves. So I don't think any relationship is dependent on any thing else."

Syed Hamid said Anwar's case was one of legal process which was subject to appeal and all countries should respect the country's laws.

On a question that the Indonesian Cabinet had still not been formed and if it had any bearing on Malaysia, Syed Hamid said there had been much speculation that with the change in leadership there would be chaos and disturbances but it was seen that Indonesia was able to change its leadership according to its laws and constitution.

"There were no disturbances, the situation is calm and it is up to the Indonesian leadership to form their Cabinet. It is not for us to say when and how. There are no implications for Malaysia except that we want to ensure that when there is a new leadership we can continue our good relations."

When Indonesia was peaceful and stable politically and economically, it

was good for Malaysia which was its closest neighbour and fellow member of Asean.

"We want to see Indonesia peaceful, stable and prosperous so we can work together without any problems. So if the Cabinet is still not formed, there are no negative effects for us."

On Yemen-Malaysia ties, Syed Hamid said he and Abubakar discussed bilateral ties and how to enhance them and the setting up of a joint commission for the two countries.

Syed Hamid said during Dr Mahathir's visit to Yemen on Aug 15-18, two agreements would be signed.

Abubakar met Dr Mahathir and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and felt that since the two countries had long historical and cultural ties, Yemen wanted Malaysians to go there to see what opportunities were available.

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