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Joint fight against militants (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Mon. - Malaysia and Indonesia today agreed to enhance co-operation and share intelligence to combat militant and religious extremist groups in the region.

Both governments have realised the importance of working together, given the evidence that such groups have cross-border links.

The decision was reached at a meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and visiting Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri at the Prime Minister's Department.

Dr Mahathir briefed the Indonesian delegation on the activities of Kumpulan Militan Malaysia that were uncovered recently.

Ten members of the group, which planned to topple the Government through violence, have been arrested under the Internal Security Act.

The police are also looking for five more group members, two of them Indonesian nationals with permanent residence status.

The Indonesian authorities are also looking for three Malaysians believed to be involved in the bombings of churches and the Atrium Plaza shopping complex in Jakarta recently.

They had earlier confirmed that another Malaysian, Taufik Abdul Halim, was also linked to the bombings.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, briefing reporters on the one-hour meeting, said both governments agreed to intensify co-operation at all levels.

"The sharing of information will enable pre-emptive measures to be taken before the groups have the chance to create trouble or threaten the internal security of Malaysia, Indonesia or any other country in the region.

"It will be a very good defence, a way of curtailing or preventing militant activities from happening," he said.

But the Minister declined to go into detail as this could affect investigations now underway.

"We gave our commitment to take firm measures to curtail the activities of militant groups."

On bilateral ties, Syed Hamid said Dr Mahathir and Megawati agreed to an annual exchange of visits between the top leaders of both countries.

The Malaysia-Indonesia joint commission meeting, which last held its meeting two years ago, would also be "utilised" to solve mutual issues and problems.

Syed Hamid said the Indonesian president had extended an invitation to Dr Mahathir and the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah to visit the republic.

Megawati had also expressed her desire to see Malaysia play a leading role in the globalisation process, the World Trade Organisation and in the integration of the economies of Asean member countries.

He said the Prime Minister told Megawati that Malaysian businessmen are interested in investing in Indonesia.

"Dr Mahathir reaffirmed Malaysia's interest ... Malaysian companies have already invested in the plantation sector and are also looking at other opportunities."

For example, Petronas is willing to collaborate on oil and gas explorations with Pertamina, the Indonesian national oil corporation.

Asked if a request for financial aid had been raised at the meeting, Sye

Hamid said there was none.

He said Malaysia repeated its request for Malaysia Airlines to be given more landing rights, a subject first raised with the previous Indonesian administration.

"We receive a lot of Indonesian workers, hence we feel it is justifiable for our national carrier to be given more landing rights."

Malaysia Airlines operates two flights daily to Jakarta.

Syed Hamid said the entry of Indonesian workers into Malaysia was also raised. Malaysia stressed the need for them to enter the country legally to avoid exploitation.

On a report that Indonesia had objected to Malaysia introducing stiffer penalties, including whipping, against illegal immigrants, Syed Hamid said this was not discussed.

Syed Hamid said Megawati had thanked Dr Mahathir for Malaysia's stand in not supporting any separatist movement, including that in Aceh.

"The territory is part of Indonesia and we will continue to respect Indonesian sovereignty over Aceh. As far as we are concerned, it is an internal matter of Indonesia."

On whether Malaysia had offered to help bring Jakarta and the Aceh separatist group to the negotiating table, Syed Hamid said Malaysia would help if asked for it.

He said Malaysia had always been forthcoming in this aspect as demonstrated by it playing host to meetings between North Korea and the United States, and between the Mindanao National Liberation Front and the Mindanao Islamic Liberation Front.

Other matters discussed by the leaders touched on maritime borders, air space, co-operation in ports facilities, Malaysia's interest in buying coal from Indonesia and greater co-operation in the generation and sharing of electricity among Asean member countries.

Earlier, Megawati was accorded a state welcome by Sultan Salahuddin and Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Siti Aishah at Parliament Square.

Megawati inspected a guard-of-honour mounted by 107 officers and men of the 1st Royal Malay Regiment commanded by Mej Hamdan Musa.