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US-Malaysia
US WANTS BETTER TIES WITH MALAYSIA

By: Salmy Hashim

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Bernama) -- The Bush administration has indicated interest in improving bilateral ties with Malaysia and welcomed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's hopes for warmer relations with Washington.

"We welcome Prime Minister Mahathir's interest in better bilateral ties with the US," a State Department official told Bernama here Tuesday.

He said: "We're very pleased that Ambassador (B. Lynn) Pascoe had a full and frank discussion with the PM in areas of common activities and concern".

Dr Mahathir met the US ambassador to Malaysia last week for their first formal talks since the envoy took up his post in early 1999.

The prime minister has said after the meeting: "We thought that with the new administration, perhaps we can invigorate our ties with the US and lessen misunderstanding between us and the US".

The State Department official, who preferred anonymity, however said that there remained "areas of concern" especially "the human rights situation" in Malaysia.

The US issued a long list of complaints about the human rights situation in Malaysia in its recent human rights report.

Washington-Kuala Lumpur relations took a turn for the worst when former US Vice-President Al Gore endorsed the "Reformasi" (Reform) movement in Malaysia at an Apec Leaders' dinner in 1998.

Gore angered many Malaysians who regarded his remarks as an interference in Malaysia's domestic affairs.

Privately, senior officials in Washington thought of Gore's remarks as thoughtless and damaging to already strained relations between Kuala Lumpur and Washington.

Former US Ambassador to Malaysia Ronald Palmer told Bernama here that relations between the two countries which had become "somewhat frazzled" since the financial crisis "have reached a point where it was time to mend fences".

"Bilateral relations under the Clinton administration had lost some of the previous warmth. The advent of the new US administration under (George W.) Bush appears to offer an opportunity to get relations back on track," said Palmer.

"This will require efforts from both sides," he added.

Palmer was ambassador to Malaysia from 1981 to 1983. He is currently Professor of International Affairs at George Washington University.

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