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US welcomes Malaysia's intention to improve ties

Mustapha Kamil in Washington

WASHINGTON, Tues: Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar came out satisfied with his first meeting ever with US Secretary of State General Colin L. Powell in Washington on Monday.

On America's end, a US State Department spokesman said Washington welcomes Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's intention in wanting to better bilateral ties with the US.

Ties between the two countries, while strongly enamelled with economic activities especially trade, have not been as smooth in the political field.

"We are more comfortable in dealing with the present US Administration," Syed Hamid told newsmen after his meeting with Powell.

He was comparing US/Malaysia bilateral ties between period of the present President George W. Bush Administration and the last few years of the Clinton rule.

The Bush Administration was more "forward looking" Syed Hamid added, saying the discussion with Powell indicated Washington was willing to constructively engage Malaysia in bilateral issues despite the countries' sharp differences on certain matters.

Observers said it was a cordial meeting, some describing Powell as being in a jovial mood.

Powell also said the differences in views between the two nations must not stop them from looking forward and continuing constructive dialogues to better bilateral ties.

Meanwhile, both Powell and Syed Hamid also used the meeting to discuss Association of South-East Nations (Asean) regional issues ahead of the forthcoming Asean Post-Ministerial conference and Asean Regional Forum in Hanoi.

The Foreign Minister said America still considers Asean an important strategic partner and a vital element towards a stabilised Asia.

On a recent State Department report putting Malaysia on the lowest rungs in countries involved in the trafficking in persons, Syed Hamid said the Department was not in control of such findings made by outside parties it engages to do the reports.

He said such reports were not fair, considering Malaysia's tough laws against human trafficking, and that both nations should spend too much time on dealing with them.

Generally, the Foreign Minister said Washington has shown less tendency now to teach other countries how to govern themselves, although it will continue to air its views at times.

Meanwhile, the State Department spokesman said Washington remains concerned about Malaysia's human rights standard, although he did not elaborate.

He said the issue of jailed former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was mentioned briefly and was not a central issue in Syed Hamid's meeting with Powell.

The issue was also mentioned but briefly during a lunch meeting between Syed Hamid and former US Defense Secretary William Cohen.

Syed Hamid has been on a whirlwind tour of several nations during the past three weeks, largely to sell Malaysia's viability as a trading partner and to look for new opportunities to strengthen ties with the countries.

He hopes that the visits would also open new trading opportunities for Malaysian products, especially edible oil as there was now a surplus stock in the country. Before coming here, he visited Mali, Morrocco, Moscow and Poland.

The trip to Moscow, he said, was also in preparation for Dr Mahathir's forthcoming visit to Russia. The Prime Minister was also scheduled to visit Germany.

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