

18/07/2001

US, Malaysia to further improve relations

Mustapha Kamil in Washington DC

FOREIGN Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar came out satisfied with his first meeting ever with United States Secretary of State General Colin L. Powell here on Monday.

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

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 said after his meeting with Powell.

He was comparing US-Malaysia bilateral ties during the present President George W. Bush administration and that of the last few years of Clinton rule.

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

Both Powell and Syed Hamid used the meeting to discuss Asean regional issues ahead of the forthcoming Asean Post-Ministerial conference and Asean Regional Forum in Hanoi.

The Foreign Minister said America still considered Asean an important strategic partner and a vital element towards a stable 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.

Generally, the Foreign Minister said Washington had shown a lesser tendency now to teach other countries how to govern themselves, although it continued to air its views at times.

Meanwhile, the State Department spokesman said Washington remained 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 but was not a central issue in Syed Hamid's meeting with Powell.

The issue was also mentioned briefly during a lunch meeting between Syed Hamid and former US Defence 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 these countries.

He hoped the visits would open new trading opportunities and markets for Malaysian products, especially edible oil as there was now a surplus stock

in the country.

Before coming here, he visited Mali, Morocco, Russia and Poland.

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

Meanwhile, Bush announced he had picked Marie Huhtala, who has been deputy chief of mission in Thailand since 1998, as US ambassador to Malaysia.

Huhtala served as director of the office of Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnamese affairs from 1996 to 1998.