

Bush and Dr Mahathir meeting on the cards

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. — United States and Malaysian officials are discussing arrangements for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to meet US President George W. Bush at the White House in the coming months, sources said today.

Officials said there were efforts to fix a date but nothing had been finalised yet.

A visit would be a major step forward in bilateral ties after past friction over the imprisonment of former Deputy Prime Minister Da-

tuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 — whom Washington still refers to as a political prisoner.

Relations improved after Bush took over the presidency just over a year ago, though Washington's envoy in Kuala Lumpur maintains an interest in the conduct of Anwar's appeal hearings.

And an invite to the White House would be a clear mark of appreciation for Malaysia's supportive stance since the Sept 11 attacks on the United States, diplomats said.

After Sept 11, Washington ap-

preciated more fully Dr Mahathir's credentials as a moderate Muslim leader and as an elder statesman in Southeast Asia committed to combating militancy, they said.

It will be Dr Mahathir's second meeting with Bush since he became president. They held a bilateral meeting in Shanghai in October at a summit of Asia-Pacific leaders.

A Washington-based US business leader, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Bush could meet Dr Mahathir as early as May. — Reuters