

# PM to meet the Pope next month

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will meet Pope John Paul at the Vatican early next month, officials said today.

They said the meeting was scheduled to take place in the morning of June 7, two days before his trip to Switzerland and Luxembourg.

Apart from the meeting with the Pope, Dr Mahathir will also hold meetings with other leaders at the Vatican.

The invitation was extended by the Pope in recognition of Dr Mahathir as a leading Muslim leader whose moderate voice has managed to influenced the Muslim world.

The meeting is expected to address the escalating Palestinian-Israeli conflict, an issue which Dr Mahathir has been very vocal about.

The visit, the first for a Malaysian leader, is regarded as another opportunity for him to share his views as a moderate Muslim leader with the leading authority of the Catholic faith.

Before this Dr Mahathir was invited to the White House by the United States President George W. Bush. The visit had been hailed as a successful meeting with regard to the war against terrorism.

Observers believe that Dr Mahathir's visit to the Vatican would further help change some of the negative perceptions of Islam by leaders of other faiths.

"The invitation also acknowledges Dr Mahathir as a leading Muslim leader whose voice cannot be ignored.

"Based on Dr Mahathir's track record, Muslims, not only in Malaysia but also in other parts of the world, can expect him to be their voice when meeting the Pope," one of the officials added.

The Pope is known to have engaged Muslim leaders in inter-faith discussions, but had mostly confined his meetings with those from the Arab world.

Dr Mahathir, who is in Korea on an official visit, is scheduled to be in Geneva on June 9 and 10 to attend the International Labour Organisation conference. He will then visit Luxembourg on June 11 and 12.