

Vatican views Dr M's dialogue with

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■ From Nuraina A. Samad in Vatican City

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THE Vatican views the meeting between Pope John Paul II and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as a "very important dialogue towards world peace and solidarity".

Vatican spokesman Ciro Benedittini said the Vatican had always been interested in inter-religious dialogues and it regarded Dr Mahathir's visit as very important.

"The dialogue will certainly con-

tribute to peace and solidarity in the world," he told Malaysian journalists.

Benedittini agreed that post-Sept 11 events had to an extent impaired the image of Islam but pointed out that this was not why the Vatican viewed it as such.

He said the Vatican had always been interested, even before Sept 11, in inter-religious dialogues especially with leaders of monolithic religions.

Benedittini said the meeting today between Dr Mahathir and the Vatican head would be "very private".

"Only the Pope and Dr Mahathir would know what they have dis-

cussed. No one else. And they can talk about anything," he said.

Asked if the two leaders would touch on the issue of Palestine, Benedittini said it was a Vatican policy that there be no pre-empted agenda.

"This is out of respect for the Pope and the visiting personality."

In fact, it was the practice that any meeting between the Pope and a visiting dignitary be conducted in private "as far as possible without even an interpreter unless necessary", said a Vatican official.

Today, the Pope will receive Dr Mahathir for a meeting that is not

Pope as 'important for world peace'

only significant but timely in the wake of developments in the Muslim world, in particular, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

National Fatwa Council chairman Datuk Dr Ismail Ibrahim said the Pope-Dr Mahathir meeting was relevant now because of Islam's image since Sept 11.

"We need this to repair the prevalent misconception of Islam. Dr Mahathir is the right person to represent Islam as he is a moderate leader who has proven to have successfully governed a multi-racial and multi-religious country in a contin-

ued environment of peace, harmony and stability," he said here.

Ismail said the Pope, as head of the Catholic Church was very influential given the fact that he meets world leaders regularly.

Dr Mahathir will arrive at Rome's Ciampino Airport today from Naples, some 200km from here.

Pope John Paul II, the longest-serving Vatican head, will receive Dr Mahathir in the "Bibliotoon del Papa" (the Pope's private library).

On arrival at Cortila di San Damaso, Dr Mahathir and his entourage, will be greeted by the Prefect of

the Papal Household.

Dr Mahathir will pass a corridor lined with magnificent works of art, in particular that of Italy's famed artist, Raphael.

Accompanying the Prime Minister is his wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Amar Leo Moggie and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Tan Sri Bernard Dompok.

Dr Mahathir and his delegation are also scheduled to tour the Sistine Chapel that houses the paintings of Michelangelo.