

14 MAY 2002

US-Malaysia

AMERICAN GROUPS WELCOME ENHANCED US-MALAYSIA TIES

By: E.Sivabalan

WASHINGTON, May 14 (Bernama) -- American-based groups are convinced that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's current visit to Washington, which has further reinforced bilateral ties between Malaysia and the United States, will spur increased economic activities between them.

Besides creating a conducive environment for businessmen from the two countries to conduct business, they said it would pave the way for more visits between top government leaders and officials.

The Heritage Foundation president Dr Edwin J. Feulner said that the improved ties would definitely strengthen economic cooperation between Malaysia and the US, which is a major market for Malaysia.

Malaysia is the 11th largest trading partner and the 17th largest export market of the US. Total trade between both countries stood at US\$29.6 billion (RM112.48 billion) last year.

Malaysia's exports to the US were estimated at US\$17.9 billion (RM68.02 billion) while US imports to Malaysia were at US\$11.8 billion (RM44.84 billion) last year.

American investments in Malaysia between 1996 and 2000 were valued at US\$6 billion (RM22.8 billion) but declined to US\$2.9 billion (RM11.02 billion) in 2000-2001.

The Heritage Foundation, founded in 1973, is a research and educational think-tank whose aims are to promote conservative public policies based on free enterprise.

In describing Dr Mahathir as "an outspoken and controversial man," Feulner said that the prime minister has strong views which were exchanged at a dinner Monday night organised by the United States-Malaysia Exchange Association (USMEA).

"It is a very good way for him to start business," he said, referring to Dr Mahathir's openness and frankness in wanting to start afresh with the US in terms of bilateral ties and economic cooperation.

Frontiers of Freedom chairman Senator (Retired) Malcolm Wallop agreed that the business climate between the two countries would be further strengthened.

He praised Dr Mahathir for defining the US war on terrorism - that it is not a war against Islam or Muslims but against terrorists.

"It (Dr Mahathir's definition) has made a huge impact in the US," he said.

Frontiers of Freedom is a non-profit organisation which is dedicated to protecting the constitutional rights of all Americans and restoring constitutional limits on the extent and power of government.

USMEA director Ken Sheffer said that Washington wanted to further expand its relations with Kuala Lumpur.

"The prime minister has made a positive return to Washington," he said, referring to Dr Mahathir's last visit to the US in 1994 when he met then President Bill Clinton.

Feulner, who held a joint news conference with Wallop and Sheffer for the Malaysian media Monday night, admitted that US-Malaysia ties were "frosty" when Clinton was the president.

Dr Mahathir arrived here Monday for a three-day visit where he will hold talks with President George W. Bush and top members of the Bush administration at the White House on Tuesday.

USMEA chairman Tan Sri Megat Junid Megat Ayub, who also attended the news conference along with his vice-chairman Datuk Jamaluddin Jarjis, said that the fact that Dr Mahathir was staying at Blair House, the US president's official guesthouse, clearly demonstrated that Bush has high respect for the prime minister.

He said that Blair House, located opposite the White House, was meant for friendly heads of state.

Megat Junid also revealed that there were groups within the US which wanted to "sabotage" the Mahathir-Bush meeting.

"There are a few groups (but) I am not so worried about them," he said.

He, however, declined to reveal the identity of the groups or the people behind them when asked by journalists.

As for USMEA, both Megat Junid and Sheffer said that its mission is to get the Americans to see Malaysia for what it really is - a country which shares similar values and experiences with the US.

"Our goal is to bring US-Malaysia relations to some level of normalcy," he said. USMEA was formalised in Kuala Lumpur early this year.

-- BERNAMA

ES MR SHY RM