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`Malaysia poised to have greater influence in US'

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WASHINGTON, Wed. - Two US Congressmen believe that Malaysia is positioned to have a greater and better influence in the United States as well as in its own region because of its strong views on global issues.

Democrat Gregory Meeks from New York, co-chairman of the Malaysia-America Friendship Caucus, said it was "Malaysia's time".

"Malaysia is positioned to be a powerful force, not just in the US but with other countries," he said after a closed-door meeting of US Congressmen with Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at Capitol Hill yesterday.

The meeting had discussed issues on terrorism, Iraq and Malaysia's concern over the tendency among some quarters to equate Islam with terrorism.

Republican Peter Sessions from Dallas, Texas, who is the other co-chairman of the caucus, said it was good that Malaysia had kept up the pressure to resolve major global issues including terrorism, Palestine and Iraq.

"These are things that Malaysian leaders have talked about and they keep these issues on the front burner, that we must work towards a solution," he said.

Saying that the US valued its friendship with Malaysia, he said both countries shared many similar interests, especially in promoting world peace and the conduct of the international community.

The caucus, also known as the Malaysian Trade, Security and Economic Co-operation Caucus, was launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in May.

The loose grouping comprising US Congressmen from both Houses, is aimed at disseminating accurate information about Malaysia.

Both Congressmen also welcomed the opportunity to meet what they described as the next generation of leadership, as Abdullah is slated to take over as Prime Minister later next year.

Sessions said they found Malaysian leaders to be open and willing to discuss issues.

"When Malaysia, its Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, talk to us, they do not hide anything. They tell the truth and their perspective, and we, too, have nothing to hide.

"We tell the truth from our perspective. And that's what makes for a good relationship. We are able to sit down and discuss issues," Meeks said.

On the delays in processing visas for Malaysians, they promised to work to ensure that Malaysians were not treated unfairly.

They said the US had to protect its borders, and the delays caused by the tightened process was more about erring on the side of caution, than the shutting of American doors.

"We look at Malaysia as a friend of the American people, and Malaysia is fighting with us in the war against terrorism," said Meeks.

Sessions noted that the negative image caused by the visa delays was of concern to American universities which rely on foreign students, and had also hit the tourism sector.

Asked about their perception of Islam after the meeting with Abdullah who had stressed that it was a religion of peace, Sessions said the US does understand that terrorism was not rooted in religion.

"Terrorist attacks were not done in the name of any religion, certainly not any religion that honoured peace. America understands that this was about terrorism and perhaps foreign policy, and not about religion."

Meeks, who has a Muslim chief of staff in his office, said both Malaysia and the US had a diversity of religions and in both nations, the followers of different religions are able to worship freely.