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Caucus

MALAYSIAN CAUCUS ON CAPITOL HILL

By: Salmy Hashim

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Bernama) -- A group of American congressmen is forming a Malaysian caucus on Capitol Hill to promote better relations between Malaysia and the United States, congressional sources said here Monday.

Called the "Malaysian, Trade, Security and Economic Cooperation Caucus," the grouping will be chaired by House Representative Pete Sessions (Republican from Texas), and co-chaired by Rep Gregory Meeks (Democrat from New York), sources told Bernama.

Led by Sessions and strongly supported by Meeks, the creation of the caucus has been in the works for the past one month, and efforts are being made to add more members to support the group. A similar caucus in the senate is also being formed.

Sessions media spokesman, Adrian Plesha expects at least "two dozen" members to join initially. About 15 members, said to be "friends of Malaysia", have already indicated that they will join.

The two congressmen were in Malaysia in January when they met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Central Bank Governor Tan Sri Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz and Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

The prime minister, who is scheduled to meet President George W. Bush on May 14 at the White House, is expected to launch the caucus on the Hill at a special luncheon following the meeting.

Dr Mahathir has accepted President Bush's invitation to Washington from May 13-15 when they are expected to talk about the crisis in West Asia and other bilateral issues.

James A. Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, said in Kuala Lumpur that Bush wants to thank Dr Mahathir for a "very stirring response" in the fight against terror.

Congressional aide Plesha said: "The caucus is long overdue, but better late than never."

He said that the idea to form the caucus came during Sessions' visit to Malaysia where "he was impressed" with the level of development in Malaysia and "saw enormous opportunity for US businessmen."

"Furthermore, Malaysia is a democracy with free and fair elections, and the congressmen want to create that awareness in the US."

Aide to Meeks, Mark Milley, said that interest to form the group among members of the US congress was raised especially after the Sept 11 attacks on the US.

Several members were interested in improving US-Malaysia relations when they realised that Malaysia, a Muslim country, was working with the US to weed out terrorists.

"Malaysia is a Muslim country, but different from other Muslim countries," Milley said.

Malaysia recently arrested 24 terrorist suspects with alleged ties to the Al-Qaeda and continues to work with the US to fight terrorism. Earlier this month, Malaysia hosted an Islamic ministerial conference on terrorism.

There are hundreds of caucuses on the Hill including one for Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Turkey and Ireland. There is one for Black Americans, Hispanic, Asian lawyers, steel, and another, called the "Harvard Gay and Lesbian Caucus."

A caucus is mainly a group of people united to promote a cause. It is not a lobby group nor does it accept funds from a foreign country or

foreign nationals.

Milley said that the group could do many things to strengthen ties between the two countries, including sponsoring of legislation or resolutions, writing letters to other members of congress about issues of interests to the group, and trips to Malaysia to better understand the country.

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