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Malaysia-US

DR MAHATHIR'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON TO FORGE CLOSER TIES

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KUALA LUMPUR, May 8 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's first official visit to Washington next week is a major step forward in bilateral ties between the two countries.

Diplomats said that the prime minister's meeting with President George W. Bush at the White House will likely invigorate relations between Malaysia and the US and minimise misunderstandings.

US ambassador Marie T.Huhtala, in an interview with Bernama here today, said that current US-Malaysia relations were as strong as in the past.

"Perhaps it is stronger in some years now. We have always had a good relationship between the United States and Malaysia.

"But, I think relations are particularly close right now. And this is because Malaysia has been one of our best partners in the region in the war against terrorism," she said.

Huhtala said that the US had always regarded Malaysia as "a friend, as a very good commercial partner, as a country with whom we can do business".

"I think it is true to say that since Sept 11, Malaysia has taken a new importance for the United States," the ambassador said.

This, she said, was due to Malaysia's "excellent cooperation" with the US in the fight against terrorism which was now the number one issue for Washington at the moment.

Huhtala said that it was very significant that Dr Mahathir was able to accept Bush's invitation to visit the US, from May 13-16.

"I think the two leaders have a great deal of important issues that they need to discuss at this point," she said.

She said that the US and Malaysia share many values such as democracy, free enterprise and a multi-ethnic society.

"We are just delighted to work closely with Malaysia," she said.

Besides meeting Bush, Dr Mahathir is expected to hold talks with Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and US Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan.

Dr Mahathir recently said that he would discuss the plight of the Palestinians with Bush.

Diplomats said the Bush administration would have to take what the prime minister has to say about the Palestinians and other world issues seriously.

"This is because Dr Mahathir is not only the chairman of the Organisation of Islamic Conference but he will also be leading the Non-Aligned Movement for the next three years," said one diplomat.

According to a White House spokesman as reported last October, Bush first communicated with Dr Mahathir by phone after the Sept 11 incident.

The two leaders first met in Shanghai, China, at the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting last October.

Other issues likely to dominate the meeting between Dr Mahathir and Bush in Washington include terrorism, trade and economic issues.

Malaysia is the US' 11th largest trading partner and the 17th largest export market. Exports to the US accounted for US\$17.9 billion while imports from the US to Malaysia stood at US\$11.8 billion.

US investments in Malaysia from 1996-2000 amounted to US\$6 billion while that from 2000-2001 was US\$2.9 billion.

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