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Mahathir-Antarctica

DR MAHATHIR HAPPY WITH ANTARCTICA TRIP

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 9 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad describes his trip to Antarctica as "a good trip" and "once in a lifetime" visit for him.

Speaking in an interview with Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik via satellite telephone from Antarctica, Dr Mahathir said he had to miss the Chinese New Year and Hari Raya Aidil Adha celebrations because of the trip to the South Pole since this was the only chance for him to visit the place.

"This is the only chance for me to come here, and I don't think I will be able to make this visit again," he said in the interview set up by Astro for a special programme aired by Radio Era tonight.

The programme, which was handled by deejay Roland Lee, recorded the 10-minute conversation between Dr Mahathir and Dr Ling at the radio station here.

Dr Mahathir, who is on leave, was accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and others, and travelled to Antarctica on the Russian ice breaker, Kapitan Dranitsyn from Ushuaia, Argentina.

Describing the place as being very cold and beautiful, Dr Mahathir said: "This is a once in a lifetime visit and because of that I have to miss the Chinese New Year and the Hari Raya Haji since I have decided to come here."

He said that yesterday they landed at the station run by the Argentine government in Antarctica, which had been deserted now since they had not conducted any research there for some time.

"We also took a small boat cruise among the small icebergs to see the beauty of this wonderful continent," he said.

Despite being on a holiday, Dr Mahathir said that during the interview they were having a small lecture by Malaysian scientists on what they have done there.

In October 1999, Malaysia had sent four of its scientists to conduct research in the Antarctica. The team comprised scientists from Universiti Malaya's air pollution research unit who were researching on air pollution.

Last December, Malaysia sent a second mission comprising two scientists from Universiti Malaya who were conducting a research on marine and biological sciences.

Dr Mahathir, in his short conversation with Dr Ling, also conveyed Chinese New Year wishes to all Malaysian Chinese and said: "I am quite sure this year's celebration will be very grand."

"I really miss it very much, I wish I am there myself but this is my only chance to come here," he said.

Commenting on Dr Ling's reference that this year would be Dr Mahathir's year since "Ma" in Chinese means horse in English, Dr Mahathir said: "I am quite aware my name is a horse in Chinese. I hope I don't behave to much like a horse going round and round. "

"I hope to go straight and maybe I will be able to be of service to the country and to all the people in Malaysia," he said.

Dr Ling earlier said that for the Chinese, the horse was an intelligent and strong animal, with a good sense of direction and since this year was the Horse Year, he thought it was also Mahathir's year due to the meaning

of "Ma" in Chinese.

Dr Mahathir in his parting shot said that it had been "nice to be able to talk to you from far away, and in a climate totally different from Malaysia."

Malaysia is 11 hours ahead of Antarctica and during the phone conversation it was about 11am in the South Pole.

Dr Mahathir, who left Ushuaia, Argentina on Feb 6 for Antarctica, is expected to return to Ushuaia on Tuesday (Feb 12).

Antarctica, which is twice the size of Australia, is the most windy area apart from being the coldest and driest place on earth. Close to 98 per cent of the continent is covered with 2,000 to 4,000 metres thick of ice.

-- BERNAMA

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