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Japan-Mahathir

DR MAHATHIR'S VISIT TO TOKYO MUCH AWAITED BY JAPANESE

By: Harlina Samson

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 9 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Tokyo, beginning Wednesday, is much awaited by the Japanese and a tight schedule has been drawn up for the prime minister.

Japan's ambassador to Malaysia, Masaki Konishi, said that during the two-day official visit, Dr Mahathir was expected to deliver two keynote addresses, one at a seminar to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Look East Policy and the other, at a symposium on Islam.

This will be the prime minister's second visit to Japan this year, the first being in May.

"Many Japanese highly appreciate Dr Mahathir's wisdom, experience and leadership. He is an outstanding Asian statesman who has made a significant contribution to the strengthening of Japan-Malaysia relations," Konishi told Bernama in an interview here today.

He said the Japanese were eager to listen to Dr Mahathir's views on how Malaysia and Japan could enhance ties as Asia undergoes great changes and faces new challenges.

During the visit, the prime minister is also scheduled to have an audience with Emperor Akihito and attend meetings with his Japanese counterpart, Junichiro Koizumi, and the finance, economic, trade and industry ministers. A meeting with Japanese businessmen and corporate leaders is also slated.

Konishi said that for the first time, a symposium entitled "Islam: Fostering Peace" would be held at the United Nations University and Dr Mahathir would be the first speaker to deliver a keynote address.

"It is going to be a very important address within the framework of the United Nations University. It is the first of its kind and I think the Japanese should make the most of such an opportunity to enhance their understanding of the Islamic world," he said.

Konishi, who began his ambassadorial duties here in January, is optimistic that Malaysia can play a vital role to promote better understanding of Islam and be the first contact for the Japanese with the Islamic world.

"To many Japanese, Malaysia is the first gateway to the Islamic world and perhaps the closest country, looking at the geographical point of view, where they can have the first contact with the Islamic world," he said.

On bilateral relations, Konishi said the ties could be expanded and strengthened not only at the bilateral level but in international fora too.

"Japan and Malaysia have been enjoying an excellent bilateral relationship. We have a very good contact and our economic interdependence is growing. Our relations are not only confined to political and economic areas but also extend to culture and education and we've decided to enhance and strengthen the bilateral relationship," he said.

Crediting the Look East Policy, which Malaysia has adopted since the early 1980s, as a significant contributor to developing the strong bond, he said that various programmes had been planned for the Japan-Asean Exchange Year in June next year to promote people-to-people contact.

Dismissing the notion that Japanese tourists are afraid to come to Malaysia because of its Islamic image, Konishi said that both governments had agreed to actively promote the tourism industry of the two countries.

Japan also proposed to forge a closer and more comprehensive economic partnership with Malaysia not only in trade and investment but also in

areas such as education, science, technology and transportation, he said.

Bilateral trade between the two countries last year stood at RM98.5 billion and Japan is Malaysia's second most important trading partner, accounting for 17 per cent of Malaysian's global trade.

Last year, 17.2 per cent of Malaysia's imports came from Japan and 13.3 per cent of its exports went to Japan. Japan also remained the second largest foreign investor in Malaysia, after the United States, with approximately RM5 billion in investments.

Konishi said that the Malaysian economy was in excellent form, backed by firm fundamentals, and all indicators showed that it was growing.

Malaysia attained a 5.6 per cent growth for the third quarter of this year and expects this year's growth to be more than four per cent.

On the Look East Policy, he said the policy had not only made the Japanese work ethics and management style accessible to Malaysia but had also enabled Malaysians and Japanese to understand each other better.

He noted that an Alumni of Look East Policy Society (ALEPS) had been formed to promote cultural understanding among its members.

"At the moment, about 6,300 students and trainees have acquired not only technologies but also Japanese work ethics and its way of management and marketing. They have come back to Malaysia and made a significant contribution to the Malaysian economy.

"During their stay in Japan, they came in contact with many Japanese people and helped the Japanese to have a better understanding of your country," he said.

Saying that Japan was committed to supporting the policy, he suggested a few changes to make the policy more effective in responding to the changing needs.

Among his suggestions were that Malaysia produce its own Japanese language teachers with the help of its Japanese counterparts, shift the emphasis of the university's first-degree courses to post-graduate level and shorten the period of study in Japan by introducing a twinning programme to cut cost.

Asked on Dr Mahathir's proposal that Japan set up a university in the region to offer vocational and technical training, Konishi said that so far, three rounds of consultations had been held by the Malaysian and Japanese governments, with the last being in November.

"I was made to understand that the university is going to be a full public university, to be established according to the Malaysian law. Malaysia is ready to offer land and building while Japan is to provide the equipment and academic staff.

"This concept of technical university is taking concrete shape and with the consultations, both sides have come to an agreement that feasibility studies would be conducted to address issues such as the finance of this university, discipline and curriculum of the university in January next year," he added.

The proposal to set up the university was made during a meeting between Asean leaders with the Japanese Prime Minister at the Asean Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan in November last year.

Konishi said the university would be the first of its kind to be established outside Japan and the Malaysian side had expressed their wish that the university start operation in September next year.

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