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Mahathir-Arrival

DR MAHATHIR ARRIVES FOR A TWO-DAY VISIT TO THAILAND

By: Zulkefli Salleh

CHIANG MAI, July 5 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrived here this afternoon to begin a two-day official visit to Thailand.

The prime minister, accompanied by Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, was received at the Military Air Terminal Wing 41, Chiang Mai International Airport, by his Thai counterpart, Thaksin Shinawatra, and his wife Khunying Pojamarn and local dignitaries.

Dr Mahathir was given a warm welcome complete with a gracious northern Thai folk dance after inspecting the guard of honour.

The prime minister's visit to Thailand is the first to an Asean member nation after he made public on June 22 his intention to step down after chairing the Kuala Lumpur summit of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) in October next year.

Dr Mahathir, who has named his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as his successor, is scheduled to visit Indonesia later this month.

His official programme starts tomorrow in Bangkok where he is scheduled to hold a bilateral meeting with Thaksin.

Among the topics expected to be discussed is the long-delayed Thailand-Malaysia gas pipeline project.

The Thai government, which recently decided to go ahead with the project, stalled by environmental concerns, is expected to reassure Kuala Lumpur of its commitment to the project.

The project entails bringing gas from the Joint Development Area (JDA) for the mutual benefit of the two countries.

The pipeline construction has been shelved for two years due to objections from Thai environmental groups and local residents.

However, the Thai government recently decided to go ahead with the project by realigning the pipeline route, so that the gas would come onshore five kilometres away from the original site.

Thaksin, during the bilateral meeting, is also expected to raise the Thai proposal to build a canal across the Isthmus of Kra.

Dr Mahathir had reportedly said during the 35th International General Meeting of the Pacific Basin Economic Council in Kuala Lumpur in May that Malaysia had no qualms about the proposed move as it was done within Thai territories.

The meeting was also attended by Thaksin.

Dr Mahathir's entourage includes Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, Agriculture Minister Datuk Mohamed Effendi Norwawi, Petronas president and chief executive Tan Sri Mohd Hassan Marican, Chief of Defence Forces Tan Sri Mohamed Zahidi Zainuddin and Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai.

Soon after arrival, Dr Mahathir is scheduled to visit a ceramics factory and two of Thailand's One Village One Product projects, aimed at uplifting the rural poor, all near here.

Tonight, he is expected to hold informal talks with Thaksin at a private dinner hosted by the Thai premier at the Chiang Mai University in Salatham, near here.

Tomorrow, the prime minister will address the Thai and Malaysian business communities in Bangkok after launching the Thai-Malaysian Chamber of Commerce at a hotel in the Thai capital.

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