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Mahathir-Pope

DR MAHATHIR IN HISTORIC MEETING WITH THE POPE

By: Mahrus Ibrahim

VATICAN CITY, June 7 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad met Pope John Paul II at the Apostolic Palace here today, capping a series of meetings the Prime Minister had with some of the world's powerful and influential leaders in the last four months.

The visit at the invitation of Pope John Paul, leader of the world's one billion Roman Catholics, is the first by a Malaysian head of government to the Vatican. Malaysia has about 600,000 Catholics.

The series of meetings Dr Mahathir had with some of the world's prominent leaders since March began with a visit to Moscow when the Prime Minister met Russian President, Vladimir Putin, followed by talks in Tripoli with Libyan strongman Col Muammar Gaddafi and last month, was invited to the White House by US President George W. Bush. The Prime Minister had also met Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung.

Today's audience with the Pope began with a one-on-one meeting between Dr Mahathir and the 82-year-old pontiff. It took place in the Pope's private library located inside his apartment.

The Pope was then introduced to the Prime Minister's wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, as well as the Malaysian delegation which included Energy, Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Amar Leo Moggie, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Tan Sri Bernard Dompok (both Roman Catholics), Chairman of the National Fatwa Council Datuk Dr Ismail Ibrahim and independent religious preacher Uthman Muhamadi.

This was followed by a photo session and the exchange of gifts.

Dr Mahathir then had talks with Vatican officials led by Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sadano.

The state of Vatican City which is also known as the Holy See is a landlocked enclave of Rome and is the world's smallest state, with a population of 890 people.

It has its own constitution, railway station and post office with the Pope being its head of state.

When news of the Pope's wish to meet Dr Mahathir became public, it was welcomed by Malaysians of all walks of life from religious leaders to opposition politicians.

They felt it was an opportunity for the Prime Minister to provide a better understanding of Malaysia especially to the Christian world.

According to officials, Dr Mahathir's meeting with the Pope had created a lot of interest among Muslims in other countries.

This could be due to the fact that the Prime Minister would be discussing with the Pope, Palestine and terrorism, the two issues which are worrying Muslims worldwide, the officials said.

After the delegation meeting, Dr Mahathir toured the Sistine Chapel which had a painting on its ceiling by the great artist, Michelangelo.

The Prime Minister then left Vatican City to perform Friday prayers at the Rome Mosque, Europe's biggest.

He also handed over a contribution to the mosque which also serves as the Islamic Cultural Centre.

Dr Mahathir is on a week-long visit to Europe which will also take him to Switzerland and Luxembourg.

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