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Mahathir-Bush

DR MAHATHIR ARRIVES IN WASHINGTON MONDAY FOR OFFICIAL VISIT

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WASHINGTON, May 12 (Bernama) -- A hectic schedule awaits Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who arrives here Monday for a four-day official visit at the invitation of President George W.Bush.

It will be Dr Mahathir's first visit to the White House since 1994, when he met Bush's predecessor Bill Clinton.

Diplomats here described the visit as "the beginning of a new chapter" in Malaysia-United States ties.

Bilateral ties had weakened previously when the then US vice-president Al Gore expressed support for anti-government demonstrators during a speech at a dinner in conjunction with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 1998.

US-Malaysia ties improved after the Sept 11 attacks on the US as Washington praised Malaysia's cooperation in efforts to combat terrorism.

Following Bush's victory in the last US presidential election, Dr Mahathir was quoted as saying that he told the then US ambassador to Malaysia Lynn Pascoe that he wanted to invigorate relations with the US and minimise misunderstandings.

For most of Dr Mahathir's tenure, bilateral relations at the working level have been more cooperative than the rhetoric, diplomats said.

"Dr Mahathir's visit to the US next week would be a major step forward in bilateral ties," said one diplomat.

Apart from meeting Bush, Dr Mahathir is scheduled to hold talks with several key members of the Bush administration, including Secretary of State Colin Powell and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Dr Mahathir who is also Finance Minister, is also expected to meet US Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan.

According to a diplomat besides bilateral ties and economic cooperation, Dr Mahathir and Bush are expected to discuss issues which include international terrorism and the conflict in West Asia.

The Prime Minister had said recently that he would take up the plight of the Palestinians with the US President after the Palestinian Foreign Minister Faruq Qaddumi requested Dr Mahathir to convey their problems to Bush.

Observers said that this time, Dr Mahathir as Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement, had "some additional weight to throw around at the White House" to get the attention of the US which is a major ally of Israel.

Dr Mahathir and President Bush had discussed the turmoil in West Asia when they met for the first time in Shanghai, China, on the sidelines of the Apec meeting last October.

A White House senior administration official had told a media briefing after the Mahathir-Bush talks in Shanghai that Bush had "a very cordial 15-minute meeting" with Dr Mahathir.

The official said Bush first communicated with Dr Mahathir early last October when the US President placed a call to Dr Mahathir in Putrajaya after the Sept 11 incident.

The diplomats who spoke to Bernama believed that Dr Mahathir would convey to Bush that the resolution of the West Asia conflict would be important in resolving terrorism over the long-term.

Total trade between Malaysia and the US stood at US\$29.6 billion last year. Malaysia is the 11th largest trading partner of the US and the 17th

largest export market.

Last year, Malaysia's exports to the United States amounted to US\$17.9 billion while Malaysia's imports from the US stood at US\$11.8 billion.

US investments in Malaysia from 1996-2000 totalled US\$6 billion.

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