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`Aussie media cause of differing views'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Australia's different perspectives on Malaysia's Internal Security Act over the years are actually the views of its media, Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer said today.

He said criticisms against the ISA had been wrongly attributed to the Australian Government when, in fact, the opposition came from journalists who were free to air their opinions.

"I disagree with the view that the Australian Government has over the years been critical of the ISA," he said.

"Some Australian journalists might have... they like to say anything they want. This is part of the function of a free society."

Australia, he said, did not wish to enter into a debate on the ISA as it was entirely a matter for the Malaysian Government and people to decide.

Downer, speaking at the end of his two-day official visit to Malaysia, made the comments when asked whether the new anti-terror law being drawn up by Australia in the wake of the Sept 11 attacks had vindicated Malaysia's use of the ISA that provided detention without trial.

The proposed anti-terror law is to allow the authorities to hold terrorist suspects for a short period.

Defending the new legislation, he said it was wrong to equate it with the ISA as it did not provide detention without trial.

"It is to allow the Australian secret intelligence service the right to detain people for a number of hours for the purpose of interviewing them."

Asked for his views whether laws such as the ISA was needed to combat terrorism, Downer said:

"Malaysia has been decisive in dealing with terrorism. We are impressed by the strength of resolve of the Government in addressing the problem."

The Minister was also asked on the sometimes stormy relationship between Malaysia and Australia, and whether measures could be put in place to prevent future differences from damaging ties.

Downer said people sometimes held different views, thus one should look at the centre of gravity in the relationship and not worry about differences on the periphery.

"We have substantive and strong links in various fields like security, education, defence, business and tourism. Where there have been differences, don't overstate them... they come and go."

Due to profound strength in the relationship, he said, both countries would be able to tide over differences that might crop up.

Asked whether Prime Minister John Howard should visit Malaysia to further cement ties, he said a visit in both directions could be useful.

"That would be a nice step forward in strengthening the relationship. We will have to see. It is a possibility that we can explore."

However, Downer was quick to state that there were no concrete plans at the moment for such a move, although a visit to Australia by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would be much welcomed.

To a question that differences between Australia and its neighbours could be linked to Australia wanting to be more Western than Asian, Downer said the question did not arise.

Australia, he said, was populated by people from all over the world.

On a news report that identified Australia as one of the two countries that had sabotaged potential investment to Malaysia, Downer said:

"We do not have any strategy to stop investment from going anywhere, but

we have a strategy to attract them to Australia."