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Malaysia-U.S.

M'SIA HAS DONE FANTASTIC JOB IN ANTI-TERRORISM, SAYS U.S. ENVOY

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 15 (Bernama) -- Malaysia has done a fantastic job in the war against terrorism, said United States Ambassador to Malaysia Marie T. Huhtala.

And she said there had been marked improvements in U.S.-Malaysia relations since last year, with President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad having spoken on the telephone and exchanged several letters.

" They have have had several exchanges of letters. These were good letters, they weren't just formal letters. They were nice, substantive exchange of views," she told malaysiakini.com, the Internet news portal, in an interview released today.

" Over the past year we have seen some very great events and the fact that our new president and your prime minister were able to start a relationship this year I think is a very good sign," she added.

Huhtala said her priorities were to cooperate on counter-terrorism with the Malaysian government following the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on Sept 11 last year.

She said on the day of the attacks, the Malaysian police immediately came over to help her officials at the U.S. embassy, adding that " we didn't have to ask them, they just came with armed forces and you may have seen that we still have a heightened level of protection here".

" We have had excellent cooperation on locating and freezing any assets that might be in your banks that belong to terrorists, and particularly cooperation with your police in tracking down terrorists".

Huhtala said the U.S. would like to see that trade flows continued to flourish and to continue to have a good environment for its businessmen in Malaysia.

Responding to a question by malaysiakini.com that some local Malay newspapers seemed to have fanned anti-U.S. sentiment in their coverage of the U.S. bombings on Afghanistan, the ambassador said the U.S. knew that this was not the official policy of the Malaysian government but rather a reflection of the free speech prevailing in Malaysia.

" I'm glad you have free speech in Malaysia like we do. You cannot equate what you hear in the press with the policies of the government, not in any country except those who have rigid control of the press by the government, but we don't have that here," she said.

She noted that Washington did have a difference with Kuala Lumpur over the conduct of the war in Afghanistan with Dr Mahathir himself saying he did not think it was the right thing to do.

" I understand it because he was concerned about the accidental killing of civilians. I respect that. He had his position, we had our position. We very strongly felt that we had to retaliate for the terrible, terrible terrorist attacks that we suffered in September.

" We had to put this organisation out of business -- the Taliban and the al-Qaeda -- which had been behind the attacks. We have been largely successful in doing that but we respect the right of another government to disagree with us on certain things. That has not in any way affected the excellent cooperation that we are getting on the ground in fighting terrorism," she said.

Likening the anti-U.S. stand of some newspapers to the situation in the U.S., Huhtala said: " If you look at the American press, you can see a

whole range of views too which do not reflect official U.S. government policy. So you have to make that distinction between the view of the press and what the actual policies are. That's part of our job here at the embassy -- it is to interpret that for our government as well".

When told by malaysiakini.com that a lot of Malaysian newspapers and television stations are controlled by individuals closely linked to the ruling party, she said: " It is not our assessment that the papers are mouthpieces for the government even though there are some ownership ties. I think there is a fair amount of freedom of speech in this country and that is to be encouraged".

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