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Anti-terrorist centre proposal (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Tues. - The United States wants Malaysia to become the South-East Asian centre for anti-terrorist activities following its success in combating the menace at home.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell suggested this in talks with Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar today.

Syed Hamid said Powell had expressed hope that a regional "think-tank" centre to counter terrorism be set up here.

"They are very impressed with the developments taking place in Malaysia. They are very, very impressed with the lead that Malaysia is taking in Asean and Asia in combating terrorism," Syed Hamid said at a joint Press conference with Powell.

"Secretary Powell also expressed hope of the possibility of working closer to make Malaysia a regional centre for activities to counter terrorism."

The Americans are thinking of an institute-like set-up to facilitate discussions, and Syed Hamid said Malaysia would be looking into this.

Hamid said the US had proposed that the institute be jointly run by both governments.

"We are one of the few countries in South-East Asia which is safe, economically developed, politically stable and have the people united behind the government.

"In terms of the practice of Islam, we are a nation which practises Islam based on the fundamental tenets of the religion. I think they need this type of a partner in the region and they feel they can work with us."

Syed Hamid added that Malaysia had also established itself as an investor-friendly nation in the US.

Describing Malaysia-US ties as "having grown" from purely economic and investment relationship to a more meaningful political relationship, he said Kuala Lumpur was also keen to be constructively engaged in areas of mutual concern and benefit.

"It was very warm, cordial and transparent. We have got a lot of agreements but when we disagreed, we expressed it in a very friendly and diplomatic manner," Syed Hamid said of his meeting with Powell and the overall Malaysia-US relationship under the Bush administration.

Powell, who arrived here late last night on a two-day visit, met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi before his 90-minute meeting with the Foreign Minister at his office in Wisma Putra here.

Syed Hamid said both nations were interested in specific areas of co-operation in the war against terror and that there was substantive working relationship.

On the extradition of terror suspects to the US, he said the Americans could follow the normal procedures open between the two nations and carry out investigations without having to focus on extradition.

Powell expressed gratitude for being able to hold discussions with Dr Mahathir, Abdullah and Syed Hamid on a host of bilateral, regional and international issues.

Thanking the Prime Minister and the Government for the hospitality accorded him and his delegation, Powell said: "Our conversations were thorough, discussing bilateral issues, regional issues, trade issues and a number of other issues that we have in common.

"I have been looking forward to this visit for a long time and I'm pleased I was able to stop here and I look forward to a subsequent visit where I can spend more time and see more of the country."

Powell said among the international issues discussed today was the Middle East crisis. He expressed the US Government's commitment to the formation of an independent Palestinian state in three years.

"I described to them (Dr Mahathir, Abdullah and Syed Hamid) President Bush's vision as contained in his June 24 speech and his commitment to bring into being a Palestinian state, hopefully within three years, living side by side in peace with Israel."

He added that the US was also actively engaged in security transformation and humanitarian situation within the towns and villages in Israel-occupied territories.

Syed Hamid said the US had a vital role to play towards a peaceful Middle East.

"We are glad to note the US remains fully engaged to see a peaceful solution in the Middle East." Syed Hamid, who later flew to Bandar Seri Begawan to attend the Asean+3 Foreign Ministers' Meeting, said he would be preparing a paper on the establishment of the regional anti-terrorist centre for the Government. Powell, he said, wanted to know if the idea was acceptable to Malaysia.

"It looks good but we have to look into the details and get the approval of the Government."

He added that the US proposal showed Malaysia had taken the correct step in combating international terrorism.