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Australia-Malaysia

OUTGOING ENVOY OPTIMISTIC OF AUSTRALIA-MALAYSIA TIES AHEAD

By: Abdul Muin Abdul Majid

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 14 (Bernama) -- Notwithstanding an "underdeveloped" political relations between Australia and Malaysia, outgoing Australian High Commissioner Peter Varghese has expressed confidence of a rosy long-term bilateral ties between the two countries.

Canberra and Kuala Lumpur from time to time would disagree on certain issues but this, he said, was not necessarily something that "we should worry about".

"I think the thing that will keep the relationship moving forward is the fact that it serves both our interests.

"The key thing is we each recognise that where we have shared interests, we build on them and where we have differences, we try to ensure that they don't get in the way," he told Bernama in a farewell interview here.

Varghese, who will return to Australia at the end of this month after a three-year stint in Malaysia, was responding to questions surrounding the prickly relations between the two countries, especially at the leadership level.

When asked whether being "vocal" in expressing differing viewpoints on the part of both sides had something to do with this, Varghese said that just like Australians, Malaysians too shared the trait of speaking out their minds.

"I think that is a good thing, a healthy thing and it is much better to have a frank dialogue than it is to have a dialogue which is so diplomatic that it means nothing," said the envoy who will take up the post of Deputy Secretary at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on Dec 2.

Saying that he would like to see more progress made in the political domain of bilateral relations, Varghese pointed out that the increase in two-way ministerial visits paved the way for a substantial political dialogue between the two countries.

Kuala Lumpur-Canberra ties are marked with unpleasant episodes including the one when former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating famously called his Malaysian counterpart Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad a "recalcitrant".

Also, the treatment of the Malaysian leader by the Australian press has long been an irritant in bilateral links.

In addition, Australia's bid to have summit talks with Asean does not go down well with some countries in the region given travel alerts for South-East Asia issued by Canberra and other western governments in the wake of the deadly Oct 12 bomb blasts in Bali which killed nearly 200 people, including Australians.

Varghese said that Australia understood the concerns expressed by a number of countries in the region over the impact of travel advisories on tourism, a big income earner for most of them.

"It is not something that we dismiss. But at the end of the day, I think our responsibility as a government is to ensure the safety and security of our citizens... We are not saying to people don't go to Malaysia or to other countries in South-East Asia.

"I think each traveller will have to make his own judgment. And there are certainly Australians who continue to travel to Malaysia, there's no question about that," said the Kenyan-born high commissioner whose parents hailed from Kerala in southern India.

Varghese, who came to Australia as an eight-year old, said that at present, the travel advisory on Malaysia stands but promised that Australia would keep it under close review.

"We do consistently review our travel advisories. They are not set in concrete. We change them regularly and we'll continue to keep our travel advisory on Malaysia under very close review. As our assessment change, so will our travel advisory," he said.

Asked on whether the high commission had received any complaints from Australian tourists or those working in Malaysia regarding their safety, Varghese said: "No, I am not aware of any Australian tourists who have approached us."

In addition, the diplomat said he personally felt safe living and working in Kuala Lumpur.

Turning to the seemingly "harsh" treatment meted out by the Australian press against Malaysia, Varghese said that the Australian media "is quite robust to everyone."

"If you ask the Australian government about the Australian media, you'll get a long list of complaints about the way which they portray government policies.

"It's just that it's part of our political culture to have a very robust, if I could put it that way, media," he said.

Admitting that this sometimes created complications for Canberra in terms of its bilateral relations with countries in the region, Varghese said that it was his government's intention to encourage the Australian media to be balanced and accurate in its reporting.

To better understand each other, the envoy disclosed that a media exchange programme allowing journalists from Australia to come here and vice-versa is in the pipeline and is scheduled to start in the first quarter of 2003.

Providing an overview of bilateral relations, he said that Malaysia and Australia had managed to build up a very strong base in a number of key areas like education, defence and trade.

Varghese said that he was very impressed with Malaysia's economic achievements and the ability of the government to manage complicated political, religious and social issues.

"I think Malaysia has a very well-earned reputation for social and political stability -- something which a multi-cultural country like Australia obviously takes a very close interest," he said.

On a more personal note, the high commissioner fondly recalled a road trip he took around Peninsular Malaysia with his wife and then 16-year-old son the first year he came to this country.

"That was really an eye-opening event for me, an opportunity to see Malaysia outside of Kuala Lumpur, to see rural Malaysia, the kampungs (villages). I really enjoyed that," he said.

Varghese has this advice to his successor, James Wise, who will come to Kuala Lumpur in January: "Go out and see a bit of Malaysia beyond KL. And work on the positives."

The high commissioner-designate is currently the Undersecretary for South Pacific, Middle East and Africa.

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