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Mahathir-monies

M'SIA ASSURED OF SWISS COOPERATION IN TRACKING ILLEGAL MONIES

By: Mohd Fisol Jaafar

BERN, June 10 (Bernama) -- The Swiss government has assured Malaysia its fullest cooperation in facilitating investigations of illegal monies stashed in the Swiss banking system, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said today.

He said this would help Malaysia in its probe into financial crime activities and in particular, the Perwaja case in which some of its funds were allegedly deposited in Swiss banks.

Speaking at a joint press conference with Swiss President Kaspar Villiger after a delegation meeting between both governments at Manor Lohn here, the Prime Minister said the Swiss government explained that such a cooperation would not contravene the secrecy rulings of its banking act and that it would not support any criminal use of the Swiss banking system.

"The Swiss government has reassured that funds obtained from illegal means is not subject to the secrecy act of the country's banking laws," he said.

Dr Mahathir is on the second of his three-day official visit to Switzerland.

President Villiger confirmed at the press conference that his government would allow investigations into cases of suspected money laundering or any ill-gotten monies stashed in the Swiss banking system.

To a question whether the Swiss government would remove the secrecy provisions in its banking system, Villiger said that could not be absolutely enforced.

He said such a system had been in place in Switzerland over the past 30 years and it would be difficult to obtain a consensus in the government and the people on this matter.

"It's a difficult risk. I feel the Swiss people would prefer to change their finance minister rather than to change their banking rules," said Villiger who is also Swiss Finance Minister.

Dr Mahathir also said that Malaysia had agreed to reopen its embassy here after closing it in October 1993.

Prime Minister said there was now a need to reopen the embassy following heightened diplomatic and trade relations with Switzerland.

He said two other issues were discussed in the meeting, namely Bruno Manser, the Swiss national who claimed to be championing for the rights of the nomadic Penans in Sarawak, and memberships in the International Telecommunication Council (ITU), of which both Malaysia and Switzerland were bidding for.

He said Malaysia had explained to the Swiss government that Manser had entered Malaysia illegally and it was impossible to keep track of his whereabouts.

Dr Mahathir said efforts to trace him had been futile and the authorities were unable to ascertain as to whether he is still alive or already dead in Malaysia.

But people who were working with him or have had contacts with him had surrendered his belongings to the government which had turned them over to the Swiss government to be handed over to his family, he said.

President Villiger said both he and Dr Mahathir also exchanged views on terrorism and other international issues, including the Palestine-Israel conflict.

Villiger said he agreed with Dr Mahathir's stance that there should be an international efforts in combating terrorism and on his opinion that one

should also look at the cause of terrorism.

Dr Mahathir later returned to Zurich, some 130km from here, by a fast-speed train.

Earlier, the Prime Minister toured the Sauber Petronas Engineering AG plant in Hinwil, where he was briefed on the development of Petronas's automobile engine programme.

There, Dr Mahathir met 16 young Petronas engineers who are entrusted with the task of developing Malaysia's own automobile, which Petronas hopes to put into commercial production by 2004.

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