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Japan-Ambassador/(With Pix)

NEW JAPANESE ENVOY SETS SIGHT TO ENHANCE TIES

By: Ahmad Zukiman Zain

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 8 (Bernama) -- Japan's new ambassador to Malaysia Masaki Konishi has set his sight to widen the scope of existing bilateral relations between the two countries as he officially began his duties today.

A distinguished diplomat, Konishi served as ambassador to the United Nations from 1995 to 1999 and as senior vice-president of the Japan Foundation prior to his posting here.

"From my experience as ambassador to the United Nations, I have known Malaysia as an active member of the international community," he said in an interview with Bernama at the embassy.

Konishi presented his credentials to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin Syed Putra Jamalullail at the Istana Negara today, getting the distinct honour of being the first foreign envoy to make the audience with the new King.

Saying he was fortunate to have inherited from his predecessors a good bilateral relationship between the two countries, Konishi is optimistic that the ties could be expanded not only on the bilateral level but in international fora.

He smiled when told that he was even more fortunate to start his stint just two days before his Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is due to arrive in Kuala Lumpur as part of his week-long tour to the region.

"Japan and Malaysia have been enjoying excellent relations," he said and credited the "Look East" policy as a significant contributor in developing the strong bond.

He said the bilateral ties have seen a large number of exchanges of people in various fields from the top level to the grassroots as well students and cultural exchange.

"The Look East Policy will celebrate its 20th anniversary this year...for the last 20 years it has made significant contributions in establishing friendly relations," he said.

While it had made accessible Japanese work ethics and management style to Malaysia, he said the policy enabled Malaysians to have a better understanding of the Japanese people and its society.

He noted that an Alumni of Look East Policy Society (ALEPS) had even been formed to promote cultural understanding in various events among its members.

Asked how the policy could be fine-tuned to bring about greater mutual benefits for Japan and Malaysia, Konishi said this year being the 20th anniversary is a good opportunity to assess its achievements.

"With regards to how this can be improved to bring greater benefits, we're willing to think together with the Malaysian government," said the 59-year-old diplomat.

Konishi said this year also marked the 10th anniversary of Japan Festival in Malaysia, an annual programme organised to introduce Japanese culture in the country.

"I'm pleasantly surprised to know that so much of Japanese pop culture like TV dramas, fashion, comics and music are being enjoyed by the people in Malaysia," he said.

Asked on the development of a proposal by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that Japan set up a university in the region to offer vocational training, Konishi said the proposal is being seriously looked

into by the Japanese government.

The proposal was made during a meeting between Asean leaders with Koizumi at the Asean summit in Bandar Seri Begawan last November.

"Prime Minister Koizumi thinks the proposal is a good one and he has instructed the Japanese government officials to take this up and consider what we can do," he said.

A law graduate from Tokyo University in 1965, Konishi joined the foreign affairs ministry the same year.

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