

21 JUL 2003

Chirac-Visit

CHIRAC'S BRIEF VISIT SEEN AS SIGNIFICANT

KUALA LUMPUR, July 21 (Bernama) -- French President Jacques Chirac's brief visit to Malaysia tomorrow will be significant as it allows him to discuss bilateral and international issues at length with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Wisma Putra said today.

"Malaysia-France relations have always been close which have been further enriched by the strong bond of friendship between the Right Honourable Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir and President Jacques Chirac, both at official and personal levels," it said in a statement issued here.

According to Wisma Putra, Chirac will also hold talks with Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Chirac will be accompanied by Minister of Overseas Department and Territories Brigitte Girardin and nine senior officials.

His visit is to honour the invitation by Dr Mahathir.

According to Wisma Putra, bilateral trade between the two countries has been on the upward trend with total bilateral trade last year valued at RM9.43 billion and for the first time the balance of trade was in Malaysia's favour.

For the period between January and May this year, bilateral trade stood at RM4.46 billion. More than 50 per cent of Malaysia's exports comprise semiconductor devices.

In the area of investment, French general investment in Malaysia last year was worth RM76 million.

"Defence relations between the two countries are equally strong. This is underlined by the umbrella Defence Cooperation Agreement that was signed in 1993," it said.

Malaysia and France signed an agreement last year for the purchase of two new Scorpene submarines. The first submarine is due for delivery in 2007.

In terms of tourist arrivals, the number of French tourists visiting Malaysia dipped to 16.6 per cent last year. A total of 27,434 French visitors were recorded last year compared to 32,922 French arrivals the previous year.

"It is hoped that with daily MAS flight servicing the Kuala Lumpur-Paris sector, the number of French arrivals will increase," it said.

There is also an increasing number of Malaysian students studying in various universities and institutes in France. There are 181 registered Malaysian students in France as of January this year.

-- BERNAMA

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