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Yearender-Foreign Relations

2003 A VERY SIGNIFICANT YEAR IN MALAYSIA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS

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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 31 (Bernama) -- The year ending today is certainly historic and very significant in Malaysia's foreign relations as it played host to the 13th Non-Aligned Movement Summit and the 10th Session of the Islamic Summit Conference under uncertain and critical world geo-political situation.

The NAM Summit from Feb 20-25 brought together 114 members at a time when the United States was preparing to invade Iraq, a founding member accused of possessing nuclear weapons.

The OIC Summit which was attended by 57 member countries from Oct 11-17 was held following the US-led invasion of Iraq and with no solution in sight in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

World leaders attending the two conferences included Fidel Castro (Cuba), Megawati Sukarnoputri (Indonesia), Atal Bihari Vajpayee (India), Thabo Mbeki (South Africa), Hamid Karzai (Afghanistan), King Abdullah (Jordan), Prince Abdullah Abdul Aziz (Arab Saudi) and Abdelaziz Bouteflika (Algeria).

NAM and OIC member countries have placed high hopes on Malaysia's dynamic leadership as chairman of both organisations to protect their interest at least during the next three years.

In the wake of globalisation with its various pressures imposed on the developing countries, Malaysia's foreign policy this year continued to place emphasis on:

- bilateral and multilateral cooperation;
- South-South relations;
- the United Nations' leading role in international affairs;
- mutual respect and non-interference in the affairs of other

countries.

Kuala Lumpur become more vocal in expressing its stand on various critical world issues, an example of which was its opposition to the US-invasion of Iraq in March, calling for diplomacy with the UN playing a decisive role.

The NAM Summit, held when the Iraq war was imminent, saw Malaysia steering the member countries towards a consensus that the UN be given full mandate in resolving the crisis in the interest of world peace.

Malaysia felt that unilateral actions in a unipolar world today threatened the interest of NAM and undermine the multilateral process as a vital instrument in resolving conflicts.

The NAM Summit also served as a platform for OIC members in NAM to discuss the possibility of using oil as a leverage to halt the US invasion of Iraq.

In his speech at the opening of the NAM Summit, then Prime Minister Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad called for the outdated perception that killing people could resolve crises between countries be dismissed.

He called instead for NAM to strive to ban war between nations.

At the opening of the OIC Summit, Dr Mahathir created controversy and accused of being anti-Semitic when he stated that the Jews rule the world by proxy whereas he had meant to call on Israel and Palestine to put an end to violence and suicide bombings.

The crux of his speech then was to call on Muslims to pause and think of ways in resolving the Palestinian conflict.

Despite the differences among the OIC member countries in their stand

on various issues, a new direction emerged at the Summit in Putrajaya for the OIC to place more emphasis on economic cooperation.

Malaysia also nominated its former Permanent Representative to the UN, Tan Sri Hasmy Agam, for the post of OIC secretary-general to succeed incumbent Dr Abdelouahed Belkeziz on the expiry of his term.

The presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin as guest at the OIC Summit was not only an interesting feature in the history of the OIC but also an outstanding achievement for the host as Russia is a world power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council with a large Muslim population.

Even prior to the Summit, Putin visited Malaysia for two days in August when several cooperation agreements in the fields of communications, defence and science and technology were signed.

The visit of Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah in August was also significant to Brunei-Malaysia relations as both countries then stated that they were closer to resolving the land and maritime issues affecting the two countries.

Malaysia-Singapore relations also grabbed public attention with Malaysia announcing that the country will continue to supply water to the republic for as long as Malaysia is not at the losing end.

The fact that Malaysia is actually the aggrieved party as Singapore has been buying water at an unreasonable rate prompted the National Economic Action Council to place advertisements in the newspapers and public booklets to refute Singapore's allegations on the water issue.

On July 24, both countries initiated a move to resolve the Pulau Batu Puteh issue in the International Court of Justice. Another dispute, the reclamation works by Singapore at the Johor Straits went before the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in Hamburg on Sept 25.

The year also saw an incident which threatened to strain Malaysia-India diplomatic relations following the action by the police to round up Indian IT professionals for alleged immigration offences on March 9.

New Delhi was reported to have issued an ultimatum that all bilateral visits and additional landing rights accorded to Malaysia Airlines (MAS) would be cancelled if action was not taken by the police against those responsible.

The diplomatic dispute was overcome when Malaysia offered an apology and gave an undertaking that appropriate follow-up action would be taken.

On July 1, Malaysia set up a counter-terrorism centre to further strengthen its commitment in the war against international terrorism.

The year also witnessed Malaysia hosting world leaders during their visit here to further enhance bilateral cooperation in various fields. They included Chinese Vice Premier Li Lanqing, British State Secretary for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Jack Straw, Irish Foreign Minister Brian Cowen, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and French President Jacques Chirac.

Cowen's visit in January was significant to forge closer ties with Malaysia which is Ireland's third biggest market outside Europe while Erdogan's visit in June resulted in the signing of agreements in the field of energy and water management.

During Chirac's brief visit in July, Dr Mahathir conferred on him the World Peace Award as a mark of Malaysia's recognition of his contributions to world peace.

At the end of July, Langkawi was the venue of the annual consultation between Dr Mahathir and his Thai counterpart, Thaksin Shinawatra, to enhance Kuala Lumpur-Bangkok ties.

Timor Leste Prime Minister Mari Amude Alkatiri visited the country in August to seek additional assistance for his newly-independent country from

Malaysia.

This was followed by the visit of Indonesian President Megawati Soekarnoputri to enhance Indonesia-Malaysia cooperation in the fields of trade and investment as well as in tackling the haze and illegal immigrant issues.

President Thabo Mbeki visited the country in September to sign an MoU for the setting up of a joint South Africa-Malaysia commission while the visit of Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe within the same month was to offer greater investment opportunities for Malaysia in his country which was experiencing peace after a 20-year insurgency.

Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi visited the country last month with Tokyo's commitment to further pursue close relations with Kuala Lumpur following the change of leadership in the country.

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