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G8-WELCOME

MAHATHIR ACCORDED WARM WELCOME BY CHIRAC AT ENLARGED G8 SUMMIT

By: Yong Soo Heong

EVIAN, June 1 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was given a warm welcome by President Jacques Chirac when he arrived for the Enlarged G8 meeting here, today.

After stepping off the boat following a 40-minute ride across from Lausanne where Dr Mahathir is staying, Chirac shook his hands and hugged him warmly. They also exchanged pleasantries.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who came shortly after the Malaysian leader, was also accorded the same warm treatment.

But this was in sharp contrast to the short handshake and stiff smile that Chirac gave to US President George W. Bush when the latter arrived here by helicopter from Geneva.

However, a French official downplayed the significance of the short handshake and stiff smile when he said bilateral relations were not based on the thickness of a handshake and broadness of a smile.

Whether France, which has been a sharp critic of the US-led invasion of Iraq in March, and the US will reconcile their differences over the invasion of Iraq will depend on a one-to-one meeting between Chirac and Bush tomorrow.

The US had somewhat reconciled their differences with Russia when Bush attended the recent 300th anniversary celebrations of St Petersburg in Russia when Russian President Vladimir Putin conceded that both Russia and the US would continue their strategic partnership despite their differences over Iraq.

Bush had also given a friendly handshake to German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, another opponent of the war in Iraq, in St. Petersburg.

After Sunday's working lunch, Dr Mahathir posed for a group photograph with the other leaders. Standing in the second row, he stood next to Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien and behind Putin.

Dr Mahathir wrapped up his Sunday programme by attending a dinner hosted by the Malaysian ambassador to Switzerland, Datuk Ismail Mustapha.

While everything had been relatively quiet in Evian as far as demonstrations were concerned as French police and military personnel had maintained tight security in the summit town, the situation was starkly different on the other side of Lake Geneva, especially in Lausanne and Geneva.

Thousands of anti-G8 protesters had burned tyres and smashed shop windows in Geneva and Lausanne.

Two vehicles belonging to the Malaysian diplomatic missions to Switzerland were damaged by demonstrators at the Royal Hotel in Lausanne where members of the Malaysian delegation and media are staying.

-- BERNAMA

SHY FR AO