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US-MALAYSIA

US-ASEAN BUSINESS COUNCIL CALLS ON US SENATE TO RECONSIDER

From Salmy Hashim

WASHINGTON, Oct 29 (Bernama) -- The United States-Asean Business Council President, Ernest Bower, Tuesday urged the US Senate to reconsider its decision to impose conditions on its US\$1.2 million in military training aid to Malaysia -- a move widely regarded as largely symbolic.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, three days away from stepping down after 22 years in power, said in Putrajaya that the Senate decision "does not make any difference to us. We don't really need that money."

Bower, in an interview with Bernama at his office here asserted, "no one here supports the comments Dr Mahathir said about the Jews. On the other hand, in our experience, Malaysia has nothing to do with anti-semitism."

"Why put handcuffs on a leader who is widely regarded as a moderate voice in the Muslim world? Why punish a country when it is a strong partner in the war on terrorism? It is our fervent hope that the legislation would not be passed."

The Senate amended its foreign aid spending bill for next year to make aid to Malaysia contingent on a determination by the secretary of state that Malaysia's government "supports and promotes religious freedom, including tolerance of the Jewish faith."

The secretary of state could waive any restrictions for national security reasons.

The House of Representatives approved its version of the bill before Dr Mahathir delivered his speech, regarded controversial by the western circle, at the OIC.

The US\$18 billion foreign operations spending bill is expected to be approved by the Senate. The House and the Senate will later meet to reconcile their differences before the bill becomes law.

Bower was recently in Bangkok to attend the Apec meetings and leaders summit. He also had private meetings with the Malaysian prime minister as well as his successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

On Dr Mahathir, he said: "He is a pragmatic leader. A builder. I do respect him. I respect people who are honest. He is fair and he really loves his country. That makes him fairly consistent. You should understand where he is coming from."

"I never understood why he uses rhetoric that seems anti-American -- maybe I never understood Malaysian politics well enough," Bower said.

Bower continued: "It is unfortunate that in his final week as prime minister our focus is diverted away from the fact that Malaysia is a close friend on the military front -- Malaysian troops rescued our troops in Mogadishu."

On Abdullah, Bower said, the future prime minister has a good track record as a foreign minister, home affairs minister and as a deputy prime minister.

"He could give the US some advice as a friend and with Malaysia playing an important role in the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and in the developing world under the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) -- he could relate to us the concerns, fears and anxieties of the Islamic and

developing world -- Malaysia is in a lot of ways in a unique position -- we need friends like that."

The council is a strong advocate for stronger US-Asean trade and has a continuous list of programmes to promote trade and investment relations between the US and the region.

The council has also been encouraging governments in the region to sign bilateral free trade agreements with the US. Singapore has signed a FTA with the US, Thailand will begin negotiations next year, while the Malaysian cabinet has agreed to move forward on the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) with the US, laying the groundwork towards FTA negotiations.

US exports to Malaysia last year was at US\$10.3 billion while US imports from Malaysia was at \$24.1 billion. Stock of US investments into Malaysia was at US\$7.5 billion, according to 2001 figures. -- BERNAMA

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