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Abdullah-Cambodia

ABDULLAH'S VISIT REAFFIRMS M'SIA-CAMBODIA FRIENDSHIP

By: Muin Abdul Majid

PHNOM PENH, Jan 25 (Bernama) -- After a week-long lull, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi embarks on the final leg of his courtesy calls on Asean leaders as he arrives tomorrow for his first visit here as the new Malaysian head of government.

The Prime Minister's hectic day begins with a trip to the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi before his arrival at Phnom Penh's international airport in the afternoon.

The courtesy visits, choreographed to reaffirm Malaysia's strong commitment to its fellow Asean members as well as allow Datuk Seri Abdullah to get closer to other regional leaders, have so far taken him to Bandar Seri Begawan, Jakarta, Singapore, Bangkok, Vientiane and Manila.

Relations between Kuala Lumpur and Phnom Penh have always been cordial, as attested by the state visit by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin Putra Jamalullail to Phnom Penh in December 2002 and the attendance of the then prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Eighth Asean Summit in the Cambodian capital a month earlier.

Soon after his arrival, Datuk Seri Abdullah, who became Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister on Oct 31 last year, is scheduled to lay a wreath at the Independence Monument in central Phnom Penh, a charming city of over one million people at the confluence of the Mekong, Tonle Sap and Bassac rivers.

The imposing structure at the intersection of the Norodom and Sihanouk boulevards was inaugurated in 1958 to celebrate Cambodia's independence from foreign rule. Now, it also serves as a monument to Cambodia's war dead.

Abdullah will then head for the Office of the Council of Ministers where he is scheduled to hold talks with his Cambodian counterpart, Samdech

Hun Sen.

The Prime Minister will return to his hotel for a tea reception with the Malaysian community in Cambodia and, in the evening, attend a dinner hosted in his honour by Hun Sen before returning to Kuala Lumpur.

Cambodia is no stranger to Datuk Seri Abdullah for he was the one in 1997, in his capacity as Malaysia's then Foreign Minister, was in Phnom Penh to formally invite the Indochinese country to attend the Kuala Lumpur Asean Ministerial Meeting.

But a political feud between Hun Sen and former co-premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh prompted Asean to postpone Cambodia's entry into the grouping at the 1997 meeting which saw the admission of Laos and Myanmar.

Since joining the grouping in 1999, there have been many improvements in Cambodia but it remains one of the poorer members of Asean, an association formed in 1967 with Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Singapore as its pioneer members.

Later admissions were Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, a country of 13 million famous for its fabled Angkor Wat and its sad history of the "Killing Fields" during which 1.7 million people died under the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said being a pioneer member of Asean, Malaysia, one of the largest foreign investors in Cambodia, could contribute in bridging the gap between the newer and older members of the grouping.

In talks with Hun Sen, Datuk Seri Abdullah is expected to convey Kuala Lumpur's willingness to enhance cooperation with Cambodia in various fields, including trade and investment as well as capacity-building.

It is also likely that he will express Malaysia's readiness to continue extending technical assistance under the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme to Cambodia.

Hundreds of Cambodian officials have attended short and long-term courses in various fields such as administration, diplomacy, technical studies and vocational training in Malaysia.

Latest figures showed that total trade between Malaysia and Cambodia from January to October 2003 amounted to about RM230 million (US \$60.7 million).

Currently, more than 40 Malaysian companies are operating in Cambodia and their total registered capital reportedly exceeds US\$1.8 billion.

Their wide-ranging ventures include in sectors such as garment and textiles; banking; hotel and apartments; petroleum; telecommunications; forestry and property development.

One of the key areas that could well be tapped by Malaysian businessmen is Cambodia's tourism sector, which, together with its garment industry, forms the mainstay of the country's overall growth.

Malaysian companies have the expertise and technology to transfer to Cambodia, with the condition that Phnom Penh provides the necessary environment to enable the private sector to tap business potentials there.

Syed Hamid said that when addressing the tea reception on Monday, Datuk Seri Abdullah is expected to remind Malaysians in Cambodia of their role and responsibility while operating in a foreign country.

Referring to the Prime Minister's recent visit to Laos, the minister said: "We are very happy about the image that the Malaysian investors have made in Laos. They are very much welcomed there and have established a good name for themselves."

This, Syed Hamid said, contributed to the image of the country and its leaders, and positively translated Malaysia's prosper-thy-neighbour policy.

Malaysian businessmen in Cambodia could well emulate their counterparts in Laos.

Caring neighbours are what Cambodia needs, and Malaysia's you-can-count-on-me principle will be the message that Datuk Seri Abdullah is expected to put across during his visit tomorrow.

-- BERNAMA  
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