

12 AUG 2004

Abdullah-Friend

AUSTRALIA IS OUR MATE, SAYS ABDULLAH

MELBOURNE, Aug 12 (Bernama) -- Under the banner heading today across page one saying "Australia is our mate: Malaysian PM", "The Australian" newspaper said that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi has opened a new era in relations with Canberra, publicly declaring Australia a "friend" of his country -- and of Asean.

This, the newspaper said, was the "first significant sign of a formal breakthrough in the often adversarial relationship".

In an interview with the newspaper's esteemed Southeast Asia correspondent Kimina Lyall, Abdullah said the Malaysia-Australia relationship had "political difficulties" but that these could be overcome.

"I will put it this way: the fundamentals of the relationship are still very strong. We only have the problem sometimes at the political level, that's all," he said in the interview (the first with an Australian journalist since taking office last year) after speaking at a dinner of Australian and Asian leaders of business and government in Kuala Lumpur.

Asked if he still thought Australia and Malaysia had political differences, Abdullah said: "Perhaps, perhaps not, lately," in an oblique reference to long-time tensions apparent during the leadership of his predecessor, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Abdullah, referring to John Howard's threat last year to take "pre-emptive strikes" in Asia to thwart a terrorist attack, said such comments did not "go down well" in the region.

But he said: "Australia is our friend, of course!"

His comments came as officials within the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations said a proposal to forge ahead with a free trade agreement between the region and Australia and New Zealand was a "done deal".

The officials told the newspaper the idea, first accepted for consideration by Asean in June, had received such warm support in the region that the grouping was even considering broadening it to include an Asean-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA) under negotiation.

Although the mechanisms of such a move are yet to be discussed, including how it may complement the bilateral agreement Australia hopes to forge with China, the proposal is a further positive sign of Australia's deeper integration into the region.

The newspaper said much of the improved relationship had come with the departure of Dr Mahathir from the Asean sphere, "as he was a strong opponent of closer ties with Canberra".

It said in off-the-cuff pre-dinner remarks on Tuesday to a group of leaders who had spent three days in Malaysia engaging in "conversations" about Australia-Asian relations, Abdullah used the word "friend" seven times in as many minutes.

Abdullah, who has not met Australia's Prime Minister John Howard since he succeeded Dr Mahathir, has accepted an invitation to visit Australia in what will be the first full official visit by a Malaysian leader since Dr Mahathir in 1984.

He said he looked forward to the meeting, which is unlikely to be scheduled before the Australian election before the end of this year.

The conversations, convened by Malaysia's Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Isis) and the University of Melbourne's Asialink Centre, were informal and off the record. But a strong theme was the acknowledgement that trade, especially the long and arduous bilateral

negotiations, forced deeper cultural and political understandings between nations.

Tan Sri Noordin Sopiee, who heads the Isis in Malaysia, and one of the participants, was quoted by the newspaper as describing the relationship between Australia and Malaysia as the same as that under Dr Mahathir but "warmer".

-- BERNAMA

NDC MFJ RM