

22 JUL 2004

Abdullah-Chirac

M'SIA-FRANCE AGREE TO EXPLORE NEW AREAS

By: Mikhail Raj Abdullah

PARIS, July 22 (Bernama) -- Malaysia and France have agreed to explore new areas such as biotechnology, education and tourism in efforts to expand bilateral ties.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said Thursday that while both sides agreed that existing ties were excellent and both had benefited immensely, they needed to be further reinforced and widened.

He told Bernama this over the phone on his way to Le Bourget Airport, after calling on French President Jacques Chirac at Elysee Palace, at the heart of the French capital.

Describing the talks held over lunch as highly productive, Abdullah said they were conducted in an open and frank manner, reflective of the deep bond between the leaders of both countries.

While previously, excellent relations existed between Chirac and former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah expressed confidence that relations between him and the French leader would also grow deeper.

He also said that a major part of discussion was on international issues centred on the security situation in Iraq and the long-standing conflict between Israel and Palestine.

As far as Iraq was concerned, Abdullah said, he shared Chirac's deep concerns over the situation there, which could best be described as 'mencemaskan' (alarming).

The prime minister said it was crucial for the Iraqi people to realise that the upcoming election in January was a golden opportunity for them to choose the government they wanted.

Therefore, they should undertake efforts to ensure peace and stability.

Abdullah said there were also concerns over the disputes among the various groups such as the Syiah, Sunni and Kurds.

On Palestine, he said a formula was needed to resolve the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians, which was why the Road Map for Peace should be adhered to by both sides in efforts to stop the situation from getting out of control.

Nevertheless, Abdullah and Chirac again expressed concern over the leadership crisis between Arafat and Prime Minister Ahmed Qurie, saying that whatever differences between them should be resolved so that Palestine could present a united front in the quest for peace.

He said Arafat was still needed while the role of the prime minister needed to be clarified.

Abdullah stressed that in all these, the Big Power should play a central role to ensure that the Road Map for Peace was implemented according to the time table.

The leaders also discussed the Millennium Development Fund proposed by France at the group of eight industrialised countries' meeting recently to tackle global poverty and resolve the problem of starvation and backwardness.

Since the proposal was still in the early stages, Abdullah said, the details would have to be ironed out so that the poor countries could reap practical benefit from the fund.

Asked whether Malaysia would support the fund, he said that at this stage Malaysia was supportive in principle.

The prime minister also said that he was very satisfied with the outcome of the talks with Chirac.

He later inspected a guard-of-honour at the Le Bourgeot airport before departing for London, where he is scheduled to meet British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Abdullah arrived here on Tuesday night for the second leg of his tour of the western powers. He was accompanied by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

-- BERNAMA

MR NM JK