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Abdullah-Korea

TIGHT PROGRAMME AWAITS ABDULLAH IN LANDMARK VISIT TO SEOUL

By: Ahmad Zukiman Zain

SEOUL, Aug 21 (Bernama) - A tight programme capped with talks with South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun awaits Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on his first visit here as prime minister beginning tomorrow.

Abdullah and Roh, who both assumed office last year, would hold discussions at the Presidential Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae) on Monday.

Apart from bilateral matters, the two leaders are expected to discuss regional cooperation notably the "Asean plus Three" process and international issues particularly on Iraq.

Abdullah would be accorded an official welcoming ceremony at the garden of the Blue House where he would inspect a guard of honour and later introduce members of his delegation to Roh.

Among those in the Malaysian side would be Higher Education Minister Datuk Dr Shafie Salleh and Foreign Ministry Parliamentary Secretary Datuk Zainal Abidin Othman, both of whom arrived here this morning.

Entrepreneur and Cooperative Development Minister Datuk Mohamed Khaled Nordin and Tourism Minister Datuk Dr Leo Michael Toyad are expected to arrive together with Abdullah tomorrow night.

Malaysian ambassador to South Korea Datuk M. Santhanababan said the prime minister had actually planned to make the visit much earlier after taking office last year.

"This visit can be seen as a courtesy visit because Korea is an important country in Malaysia's neighbouring Asia Pacific region...Korea is an important participant in the Asean plus Three process," he told Malaysian journalists covering the trip here.

Since coming into office, Abdullah has visited all the other nine Asean members as well as China and Japan, the other two countries apart from South Korea in the Asean plus Three process.

Santhanababan said the prime minister's visit would also be in tandem with a tradition held by Malaysia and South Korea since diplomatic ties were established in 1960.

"If you go back over the last 40 years, every president of Korea has visited Malaysia and every prime minister of Malaysia has been on official visit to Korea.

"So this is a continuation of a tradition that has been established by our previous prime ministers. We have also had a visit by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong here in 2002," he said.

The last visit by a Malaysian prime minister to South Korea was by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in May, 2002.

Santhanababan said Abdullah's visit was a celebration of friendship that Malaysia had with South Korea, which had been made stronger since the implementation of the Look East Policy in 1992.

"It is a time to take stock of all the achievements in our bilateral relations, how good the friendship is.

"Speaking of this, I must say that there are no problems in Malaysia-Korea relations, our Prime Minister is making a visit at a time when there are no issues, no thorny issues to handle," said Santhanababan.

The prime minister would begin his heavy schedule on Monday by laying a wreath at the National Memorial Tower and immediately after that heads back to his hotel to open a business forum organized by the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority (MIDA) and the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (Matrade).

He would then attend a luncheon hosted by the Federation of Korean Industries before departing for the welcoming ceremony and his talks with the South Korean president.

Roh would later host a dinner at the Blue House. On Tuesday, Abdullah will meet South Korean captains of industry before meeting some 250 Malaysian students.

He will then hold a media conference, which according to Malaysian officials, was expected to be attended by up to 100 Korean, international and Malaysian media representatives covering the trip.

After lunch, the prime minister would depart for the Seoul Metropolitan Government Building where he would be conferred the Freedom to the City of Seoul Award by mayor Lee Myung-bak.

Abdullah is scheduled to leave for home after the event.

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