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PM-AFRICA  
HATS OFF TO PM FOR TACKLING AP ISSUE ABROAD

By: Salbiah Said

PRETORIA (South Africa), July 28 (Bernama) -- As Prime Minister and Umno President, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi could not have done more when he tackled the Approved Permit (AP) issue head-on.

No doubt it was a local issue, but Abdullah showed that he was still in charge despite being away for three days, fulfilling his diplomatic duties in establishing and promoting good relations with South Africa, observers said.

At the end of his three-day official visit to South Africa yesterday, he gave the Malaysian media and the public what they expect of his administration: transparency.

At the press conference, he directed Minister of International Trade and Industry Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, who is at the centre of the controversy, to publish the full list of AP holders to avoid negative public perceptions.

"Okay, publish all, publish all. There's no need to keep. Why should we keep. If by keeping we create negative perceptions, that's not right, that's wrong," he said in response to allegations by Dr Mahathir who is now Proton adviser that Rafidah did not disclose the full list of AP holders.

In a quick response, the ministry released the full list of 2004 AP holders in Kuala Lumpur.

Observers also commended his decisive and forthright approach in tackling the issue.

Abdullah said he had no intention of not publishing what had already been made public.

"The list was the latest until 2005 and the public has seen the latest list. If there's anything that has been left out inadvertently, then we would furnish further. But Rafidah would be in a better position. I have given and published the list on that day," he said.

On July 21, Abdullah had said that the government decided to release the list of AP holders to end speculation on the issue. He however said some people might still be upset, regardless of the government's decision.

"We decided to release the names because there was too much noise being made. There was a lot of speculation. A lot of stories were circulating, many of which were untrue," he had said after chairing the Umno supreme council meeting at the PWTC.

Even his reaction to the decision by Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Bhd (Proton) not to renew its Chief Executive Officer Tengku Mahaleel Ariff showed his maturity in tackling domestic politics, observers said.

Abdullah told reporters here Wednesday that clarifications on the matter should be made by the board.

"They will know the answer. I would give the board the benefit of the doubt. The board must act in the interest of Proton as the national car manufacturer. They must have the interest of the national car at heart," the premier said.

"They must ensure that there's been progress by Proton. That is certainly what I want to see. Details of the management are matters for them to decide. I will leave them to make the best of decisions in the interest of the board."

For Abdullah, his visit to South Africa has been fruitful in efforts to further strengthen bilateral ties.

His visit at the invitation of President Thabo Mbeiki, was his first to

South Africa, since taking the helm from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in October 2003.

Both Malaysia and South Africa are already strong partners in the multilateral context, with both playing active roles in the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77, and both also leading members of the Commonwealth of Nations.

At the press conference, Abdullah said that he was happy with the outcome of his visit as both he and the South African leader had an undertaking to improve trade and investments between the two countries.

A measure of the success of his visit was the establishment of a trade and investment committee between both nations. The committee is expected to hold its first meeting in Kuala Lumpur towards the end of the year.

The formation of the Malaysia-South Africa trade and investment committee was a fast track approach, he said.

Abdullah scored another win during his visit when he responded to questions at the Malaysia-South Africa business forum yesterday with confidence but still maintained his warm and friendly approach.

"You must mingle, exchange cards and make a lot of money," he said in jest as he concluded the session at the forum, drawing applause and laughter from the gathering of some 500 people from both Malaysian and South African business community.

Questions ranged from the government's policies in uplifting the Malay standards, human resource development, South-South cooperation, the scrapping of the ringgit peg against the US dollar, tourism and trade-related issues.

On South-South cooperation, he said that the initiative spearheaded by Dr Mahathir 10 years ago was still high on the Malaysian agenda despite him being the chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).

"Certainly not less today than before," said Abdullah, citing the Langkawi Dialogue which promotes South-South cooperation through smart partnership and promotes ties and projects among member nations.

On the decision to replace the ringgit's fixed regime with a managed float, the premier said the move would certainly boost all sectors of the Malaysian economy.

On Sept 1, 1998, Malaysia pegged the ringgit at 3.80 per US dollar to thwart manipulative attacks on the local currency by currency speculators during the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis.

"We would be better prepared to face a similar crisis," said Abdullah who is also Finance Minister.

For the Malaysian community in South Africa, only 200 of them, Abdullah's visit brought them closer to home.

At the Malaysian High Commissioner Yahaya Abdul Jabar's official residence, Abdullah's warmth won the hearts of the Malaysian community in South Africa, some of them students who wanted to capture the moment by snapping shots of the premier and taking individual and group photographs with Abdullah, who had been in South Africa when he was the Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.

To show their fondness of Abdullah, Malaysian food, not from any hotel or restaurant, but specially prepared by wives of officials serving the Malaysian High Commission here, were served to him and the Malaysian delegation who by then were already missing Malaysian food and delicacies.

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