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US-Malaysia ties on the upswing under Abdullah, says Huhtala

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Ties between the United States and Malaysia are on the upswing under the leadership of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi following a strained period over the invasion of Iraq, US Ambassador to Malaysia Marie Huhtala said today.

She said Washington was hoping that both countries could move forward in their relationship and not be constrained by the past.

She was optimistic that relations would continue to improve as bilateral relationship had always been sound despite the occasional hiccups.

Huhtala said there was sizeable trade and investment between both countries besides substantial people-to-people ties and educational links.

"But all of this can be expanded and we can move towards greater co-operation on economic and political matters. I am hopeful that we can go down that road together," she said in an interview with the New Straits Times today.

Acknowledging that US-Malaysia ties had suffered after the invasion of Iraq, she said the US Government felt the time was right under Abdullah's leadership to take bilateral relations to a new phase.

"I am hoping to see a renewed exchange of official visitors in the coming year and we will be able to improve our ties now that Malaysia has a new leader."

Huhtala, who has been ambassador here since Sept 30, 2001, said the embassy had been involved in talks with the Government on new areas of co-operation with possible discussions between Malaysian and US officials in Washington on the cards.

On Malaysia's role in international affairs, she said it had the capability of playing a leading role because of its exceptional qualities as a nation.

"I have always believed that Malaysia can play an important international role, first of all because it is such a well-developed country with a Muslim majority. It has shown that you can have a primarily Muslim country that is also economically developed and has high educational levels and is a democracy."

Huhtala said Malaysia was uniquely placed to take a leadership role in the world, especially in its capacity as the chair of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

"It could do so by bringing countries together and pushing them in constructive directions," she said, adding that the Middle East and Iraq were crying out for constructive leadership like that which Malaysia could provide.

The US, she said, welcomed Malaysia's constructive help in Iraq as it had a lot to offer in the reconstruction of the war-torn country, especially in terms of road building and construction.

Denying allegations among certain international quarters of the existence of a blacklist of countries, including Malaysia, which had opposed the invasion of Iraq, she said in the early days, only US companies could vie for such projects.

"There was never a blacklist. This (initial awarding of project to US companies) makes sense especially if it was tax payers' money and that is the way it is."

Huhtala said Malaysian companies were eligible to bid as sub-contractors for projects in Iraq using US government funds besides offering themselves as primary contractors for projects using the Iraq Fund set up after the Madrid Conference.

She said Malaysian companies could not, however, vie for primary contracts using US funds as it was not among the 60 countries which

assisted the US in the invasion of Iraq.

"Now, the signals out of Washington are that this situation can change if you join with us in the reconstruction effort, you would be very welcome to do so and that would open the door for your companies."

On Abdullah's leadership, she was impressed by his "firm stand" in fighting corruption and improving delivery of services to the people.

She said US President George W. Bush had sent a congratulatory message to Abdullah on his appointment as Prime Minister which had been reciprocated by "a very nice reply as well and I am very encouraged by that".

On the statement by Heritage Foundation president Edwin J. Feulner in Washington yesterday that former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad could play the role of honest broker with countries that the US had difficulties with, she welcomed such efforts by non-governmental organisations or people not in government.

"I don't know if he can but if he is able to play a positive role, I would welcome it," she said when asked if Dr Mahathir would be able to play such a role.