

23/10/2003

Howard knocks bilateral ties

AUSTRALIAN Prime Minister John Howard shook hands with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the close of the Apec Summit in Bangkok. And that was all. Unlike American President George W. Bush, he did not speak to Dr Mahathir during the two-day meeting.

Neither will he be "knocking on the door" when Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi becomes Prime Minister. Howard's message is clear - he is not going out of his way to improve relations with Malaysia after Dr Mahathir retires at the end of this month.

This is unfortunate. When Howard became Prime Minister seven years ago, he sought to mend the diplomatic fences that had been damaged during the Bob Hawke and Paul Keating years. He has ended up instead by adding to the long history of verbal spats between Australia and Malaysia.

Although Howard will not go out of his way, Abdullah has taken it in stride. As he pointed out, "If they have certain policies, it is their choice. We will not force them to knock on our doors."

While Malaysia and Australia cannot agree on certain matters, they can still co-operate in other areas. In pronouncing that the "Australia-Malaysia bilateral relationship is in very good shape" last July, Australian Minister for Trade Mark Vaile cited as evidence the growth in business ties and the increase in people-to-people links. Despite the diplomatic acrimony, Malaysia and Australia remain military allies under a five-power defence arrangement.

Many Australians continue to come to Malaysia to do business and many Malaysians keep on going to Australia to study. Nevertheless, bilateral relations are harmed when there is a breakdown in rapport between leaders. Howard's remarks raise further questions over his attitude towards Malaysia. By his unbending posture towards Abdullah and by closing the door to the possibility of a new beginning, Howard has given another nasty knock to Malaysia-Australia relations. Well, as the old Malay saying goes, we will dance according to the tune.