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It is Howard's choice, says Abdullah

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KUALA TERENGGANU, Tues. - Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said today that it was Australian Prime Minister John Howard's choice if he did not wish to go out of his way to improve relations with Malaysia.

"If he is good to us, we will be good to him.

"If they have certain policies, it is their choice.

"We will not force them to knock on our doors," he said.

Abdullah said while Malaysia had differing views on specific matters, there were other areas upon which co-operation could be built that would not affect relations.

"This is like with the US.

"There are specific matters in our relationship with which we cannot agree but in other matters we can co-operate.

"We hold on to the principle of defending our interests and sovereignty," he told reporters after a luncheon with imam and bilal in conjunction with his visit to Terengganu.

Abdullah was asked to comment on an AFP report saying that the Australian Prime Minister would not go out of his way to improve his sometimes testy relationship with Malaysia after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad retires next week.

Howard was also quoted as saying he did not expect relations with Malaysia to change dramatically in the short term.

He also said he would not be knocking on the door the day after a change in prime ministership in Malaysia.

Abdullah said Howard's views reflected his uneasiness with Malaysia's approach and with Dr Mahathir's criticism on many matters, especially those affecting developing countries.

"He does not understand. What we are doing is protecting our interests as a sovereign nation and we obviously don't want any interference or any attempt to interfere in our affairs or any action that will threaten our sovereignty.

"It has been and will continue to be our principle in building relations with other nations," he added.

Asked if Australia saw Malaysia as a threat to its economy, Abdullah said he would not know but whatever the Government had done was for the country's interests.

He also drew attention to Malaysia often expressing its views on matters affecting developing countries in the South-South framework.

"It is not wrong to give views on the problems faced by developing nations, such as in matters relating to the World Trade Organisation on free and fair trade."

Abdullah was also asked to comment on another AFP report saying US President George W. Bush had pulled Dr Mahathir aside at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum in Bangkok and told the Prime Minister that his speech at the recent OIC Summit in Putrajaya was "strong and divisive".

On this, he said that whatever statement coming from the US on Dr Mahathir's views on the situation faced by Islamic nations presented at the OIC Summit had been made out of context.

"The speech must be read in full. If only a certain part is taken, it will be out of context. This will invite many views."

