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US envoy Huhtala: Our relations good and strong

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - United States ambassador to Malaysia Marie T. Huhtala today said bilateral relations between Malaysia and the US were "very good and strong" and earlier comments on past problems might have been exaggerated.

Huhtala said the cordial meeting between Dr Mahathir and US President George W Bush in Evian, France, recently was further proof that relations were good.

"I never said our relations were at their lowest point. I think my comments have been taken out of context. What I said was that we have had problems in the past and really want to concentrate on how to improve it.

"I was trying, in a spirit of constructive argument, to explore ways in which we could make it even better.

"By the fact that the two leaders (Dr Mahathir and Bush) met in Evian, it is indeed a good relationship," she said after attending a talk by American author Dr Barathi Mukherjee at the National Library.

At a forum organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute in May, Huhtala had said that US-Malaysia bilateral relations was a hot issue.

She also said that there had been a very public airing of differences between the two countries over the Iraq war.

Huhtala had said that many were asking if these relations could be restored to the warm ties enjoyed just a year ago.

However on Sunday, Dr Mahathir said any strain in bilateral relations was not reflected in Bush's attitude towards him during the enlarged dialogue ahead of the summit of the Group of Eight in Evian.

He had described his meeting with Bush as "warm".

On a separate issue, Huhtala said the United States had no plans in taking over Malaysia's role in the peace process in southern Philippines.

Responding to reports that the US was keen in troubleshooting the stalled peace process in southern Philippines, Huhtala said any US participation would only be in an unofficial capacity.

She said Malaysia had been playing a very helpful role as the formal broker for peace agreements in the Philippines and the US had no plans to assume that role.

It was reported that the US was interested in playing a role similar to what it was doing in the Israeli-Palestinian rift.

Reports also said if Washington entered the picture, Malaysia, which had hosted several talks between Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the past, might feel slighted.

The report quoted a Philippine opposition senator Aquilino Pimentel, who was said to be pushing for a US-brokered peace deal in the south.

It said that Washington was interested in such a role but did not want to offend Malaysia as it had long been deeply involved in the southern Philippine peace process.

"We still see Malaysia in the lead when it comes to playing peacemaker in conflict resolution in southern Philippines," Huhtala said.