

29 OCT 2003

MAHATHIR-HONESTY

MAHATHIR'S HONESTY WILL BE MISSED, SAYS TOP US BUSINESS OFFICIAL

By Siti Hawa Othman

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 29 (Bernama) -- "What I will miss most is his honesty," a top US business official said when asked on what he will miss most when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad leaves office on Friday.

"I never had a question where I stood with the PM," said Ernest Z Bower, president of US-Asean Business Council, Inc.

Speaking to Bernama on the sidelines of the recent APEC Leaders' Summit in Bangkok, he said that in any relationship, it was "nice to know where you stand with your partner."

He said when Dr Mahathir was mad about something he would be really mad "and when he was happy with something, it was ambiguous."

The US-Asean Business Council, he said, had enjoyed a very frank, candid and practical business relationship with the prime minister over the years.

Bower together with members of the US-APEC Business Coalition had a brief meeting with Dr Mahathir during the Bangkok APEC and the prime minister again demonstrated his practical approach towards business.

"We will miss that kind of leadership that is practical, direct and honest," Bower said.

He said this was because the business community "likes predictability and stability and it likes a leadership that is decisive."

Malaysia, Bower said, was run by "a man who actually runs the country in some way like a CEO (chief executive officer)."

Dr Mahathir is sometimes referred to as the CEO of Malaysia Incorporated.

"We think that kind of leadership is easy to do business with," Bower said, adding that he is also bullish about Malaysia under the leadership of

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the current Deputy Prime Minister.

He said American businesses had been successful in Malaysia and the United States was its biggest foreign investor.

"We think Malaysia will move forward with free trade with the US

in the next few years," he added.

Malaysia, Bower said, was moving into regional integration within Asean and was a good member of the Asean Free Trade Area "except for the auto sector."

"Malaysia's (economic) direction looks good for business in being stable. It is an important contributor not only to Asean's growth but also to the Asean-China link."

Asked on the occasional harsh criticisms made by Dr Mahathir, Bower said personally he wished that the prime minister's criticisms about the US and things that he thought were wrong could be shared privately and diplomatically.

"But he (Dr Mahathir) is always a man who said what he thought," he said.

"Business (the business community) always tries to understand that it wasn't because he had bad feelings about the US but (because) he had strong beliefs where his country was going," he said.

As such, Bower said both parties (Malaysia and the US) were still able to work together, especially for the long term, and this came from honesty.

"This is proven by the fact that the US never had a dip in its investment nor in its relationship with Malaysia," he said.

Following the sensitivities that had emerged after the Cancun World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting and the Putrajaya Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit, Bower said the US-Asean Business Council did ask for advice from the prime minister on how to manage these sensitivities and Dr Mahathir said he had always said that he strongly supported US-Malaysia relations.

Dr Mahathir's advice to them was "to reach out more, to communicate, to focus on policies that will help alleviate poverty and to reach out to those who did not have the opportunities."

"He said if we could do that successfully, we will go to building new bridges of trust," Bower said. -- BERNAMA

SHO SHY