

## **US to steer clear of Najib's scandal in KL visit**

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**By Reuters**

US Secretary of State John Kerry will press Malaysia to redouble efforts against people trafficking on a visit next week but will not become embroiled in a scandal involving corruption allegations against Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, a senior US official said on Friday.

Kerry (photo) will be in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday and Thursday for meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which Malaysia currently chairs, and will have bilateral talks with Najib and Foreign Minister Anifah Aman.

The visit comes just days after the United States took Malaysia off its list of worst offenders in human trafficking in an annual report, removing a potential barrier to a signature Asia-Pacific trade pact despite opposition from human rights groups and nearly 180 US lawmakers.

A senior US State Department official said Kerry was expected to "make a push for a redoubling of efforts on the parts of the Malaysians to expand prosecutions" for trafficking.

He said experts had judged there had been some improvement in Malaysia's approach to trafficking, but in reference its new grading in the US report, added: "It's very important to recognize that 'tier two watch list' is not a good grade."

Asked what impact the allegations against Najib would have on the talks, the official said Malaysia was at an "extraordinary delicate and complicated moment" politically, but Kerry was going there for ASEAN-related meetings.

"The secretary of state of the United States is not going to get into the middle of an internal political scandal, or a legal investigation that's occurring in a foreign country merely because he's attending meetings there," he said.

Najib has been weighing legal action against a US newspaper, The Wall Street Journal, which reported this month that investigators looking into a debt-laden state fund, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), had traced close to US\$700 million of deposits moving into his personal account.

Reuters has not verified the report.

Najib has denied taking money for personal gain and said the allegations are part of a campaign to force him from office.

Kerry's main focus in Malaysia is expected to be China's assertive pursuit of territory in disputes with several ASEAN states, including Malaysia.

US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Russel said last week that Kerry, who will visit Egypt, Qatar, and Singapore before Malaysia, would repeat a call for a halt to land reclamation and militarization of disputed territory in the South China Sea.

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