

Malaysia, Australia in no rush to seal trade pact

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PUTRAJAYA: Malaysia and Australia have agreed that no time frame should be set for the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two countries.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his Australian counterpart John Howard arrived at this conclusion after talks on the matter.

At a joint Press conference following Howard's official visit to Malaysia, the Prime Minister said they concurred on the need for FTA negotiations to continue without a deadline.

"We have not decided when it will be concluded but we are aware that our officers are working hard on the matter," Abdullah said.

Howard said it was important that negotiations not have a particular time frame as any decision on such matters should be done methodically and meticulously to ensure the FTA benefitted both nations.

"You have to do it meticulously so that the FTA can offer something productive," he said.

The two leaders spent about 90 minutes at the Prime Minister's Office, discussing a wide range of issues of common interest.

Howard is in Malaysia on a three-day official visit.

Negotiations, which began in July last year, have focused on tourism, education and professional services.

The FTA will pave the path towards comprehensive and liberal benefits for the business communities of both countries.

Malaysia is Australia's ninth-largest trading partner with annual bilateral trade amounting to US\$7.5 billion (RM27.7 billion).

Australian investments in Malaysia amount to A\$500 million (RM1.3 billion).

Both leaders, while expressing their satisfaction with existing vibrant and strong relationship, agreed that more could be done in the areas of economy, trade and investment.

"There are lots of Malaysian investments in Australia and we like to see more Australian investments in Malaysia.

"I welcome his (Howard's) decision to bring along a number of Australian businessmen."

Abdullah also acknowledged the fact that both Malaysia and Australia had done well in education co-operation.

"Many Malaysians are studying in Australia and we continue sending Malaysians to take advantage of the opportunities for higher education there. Our students have benefitted in many ways.

"There are lots of opportunities (in Australia) that our students

like to take advantage of."

Howard, meanwhile, said it was a fact that on a proportionate basis, there were more graduates from Australian universities in Malaysia than in any other country in the world.

"This (education co-operation) is a remarkable asset and wonderful legacy of the wisdom of many people in earlier generations who have laid down the foundation for that.

"When the relationship has had some difficulties as it has had, that solid foundation has kept the relationship going."

Howard added that the intelligence and security agencies of Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore also shared positive co-operation.

He said many Australian businessmen found Asean partners doing business with them had much in common in terms of the

system of laws and corporate governance.

"There were 66,000 Malaysian visitors to Australia last year.

"They all think that we have a strong and vibrant relationship."

The leaders also discussed the importance for greater understanding in dialogues between Muslims, Christians and the Jews.

Howard said a greater understanding on these issues was important in the context of some of the challenges of the world.

He said Australia and Malaysia, with their differences but tolerant history, could make contributions to these issues.

"The more we discuss this thing, the more we find we have so much in common.

"These common grounds can be used to overcome challenges posed by some of the evils we find in our regions," Howard said.

They also re-affirmed positions on various issues, including the situation in Asean, the Middle-East and North Korea.

Both leaders expressed strong support for the reference made during the recent Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation meeting in Hanoi that wanted North Korea return to six-party talks.

They also expressed concern on the situation in Iraq.

Abdullah said it would take time for the situation to improve but that "something has to be worked out so that tension in Iraq can be eased. Continuing talks can bring about improvement in the situation for Iraq".

Abdullah added that the Iraqis should be given a chance to rebuild their country.

He said Malaysia, as the chairman of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), would continue to discuss the situation in Iraq with other OIC members.

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