

KL-Canberra ties receive a boost

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PUTRAJAYA: Relations between Malaysia and Australia are strengthening with Australian Prime Minister John Howard's visit here - the first official bilateral visit by an Australian

premier since 1996.

The three-day visit is to return a similar one by Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to Australia last year - the first by a Malaysian prime minister in 21 years - when he launched the Australia-Malaysia Institute to foster greater people-to-people and institutional links.

Bilateral relations, which hit a rough spot in 1995 when former Australian premier Paul Keating called former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad "recalcitrant", have improved significantly since Abdullah succeeded Mahathir three years ago.

At a joint press conference following a four-eyed meeting yesterday, Abdullah said he was happy to welcome Howard and hoped bilateral relations would improve further.

Howard said both countries had a long history, especially in education, and this has kept the relationship going.

"We have more Australian graduates in Malaysia than any other country in the world and that is remarkable. It is this foundation that has kept the relationship going when there were certain difficulties in our relationship," he said.

Abdullah also said talks on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Malaysia and Australia were ongoing at the senior officials level but no deadline had been set for them to be concluded.

Howard said he told Abdullah many Australian businesses have found it easier to deal with

Malaysia because of the common system of law, land ownership and corporate governance.

"This is important in a globalised economy," he said.

He added that more economic cooperation and improvements in trade and investment were needed, as Malaysia was Australia's number two trading partner in Asean and number nine in the world.

Abdullah noted that there were many Malaysian investments in Australia, adding that the government would like to see more Australian investments in Malaysia.

The discussion between both leaders also touched on the situation in Asean including in southern Thailand and the Philippines, and the Middle East.

Howard said he also discussed the importance of interfaith understanding between the Islamic, Christian and Jewish faiths.

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