

Group set up to smoothen ties

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14-member panel to keep eye out for problems between Malaysia and Indonesia

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PUTRAJAYA: A group of eminent individuals – consisting of seven members each from Malaysia and Indonesia – will be set up to keep an eye out for any issue that may lead to complications in relations between the two countries.

Announcing this after a two-hour meeting with visiting Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono here yesterday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the group would be made up of representatives from different fields such as economy, religion and culture.

"I welcome this proposal from the President. We think it is important to have this group.

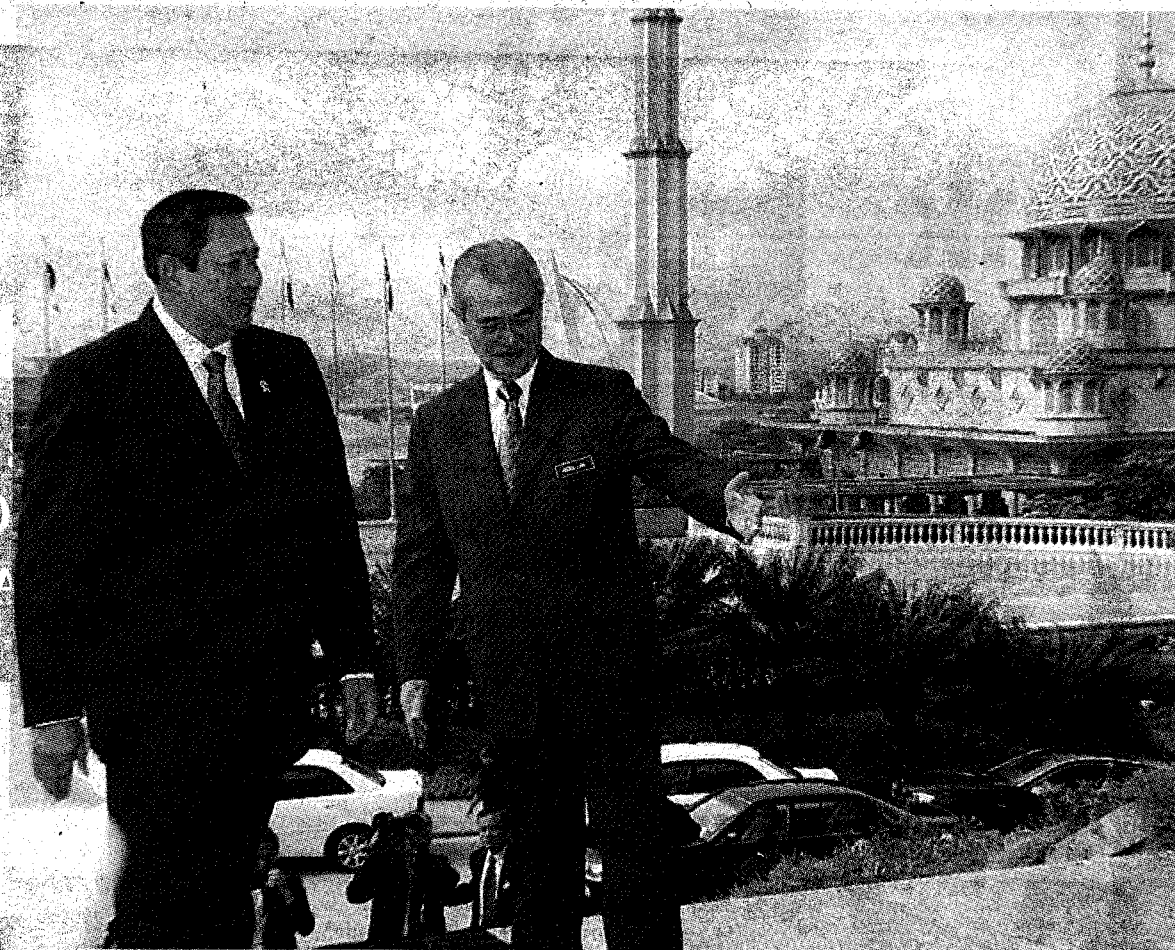
"They can meet any time they want and their duty is to keep surveillance or an eye out for current events and developments that may bring about a deterioration of ties.

"They can bring up these issues for discussion with their respective groups or sectors and find a resolution.

"They can also give their opinions, which can then be channelled to the administration in both countries so decisions can be made on the way to resolve any complication or whether something should be implemented," he said.

Recent events – such as demonstrations by Indonesians against the use of certain folk songs and dances by the Malaysian government and the reports of abused maids and workers – had led to tensions between the two countries.

Other outstanding issues between



Warm welcome: Abdullah receiving Susilo when the latter made a courtesy call on him at Bangunan Perdana Putra in Putrajaya yesterday. — Bernama

Malaysia and Indonesia were border disputes, particularly over the Ambalat area in the Sulawesi Sea and the perennial problem of haze.

Abdullah also announced the establishment of an "inter-media" dialogue between the Malaysian and

Indonesian press to ensure a flow of accurate information as well as to prevent over-sensationalism of certain stories and a new mechanism for the handling of Indonesian workers in the country.

Abdullah said the mechanism for

Indonesian workers was aimed at controlling and reducing the number of those coming here without valid documents, which would also prevent them from receiving aid and legal assistance when they encountered problems.

Susilo said the Indonesian government wanted the mechanism or the policy to be in place for its workers within the next five years.

"The mechanism at present is good but we hope to further strengthen it so that our workers can bring benefit to Malaysia.

"We are satisfied with the treatment and protection our workers received, and the prominence given to their cases," he said.

Abdullah also said the two countries were on track to achieve more than their initial target of trade volume of US\$10bil (RM33bil), expressing confidence that they would achieve more.

"Our initial target was US\$10bil but at present, we found that we have achieved this volume, even before the target date itself," he told reporters after announcing the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Malaysia and Indonesia on trade and investment here yesterday.

The MoU was signed between International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and her counterpart Dr Mari Elka Pangestu after the meeting between Abdullah and Susilo.

Susilo, who launched 25 new passport application counters at the Indonesian Embassy, also said Indonesians working here could now have their passport renewals done at the embassy within three hours.

Previously, there were only eight counters and it took up to 41 days for passports to be renewed.

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Concert marks 50 years of ties