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All eyes on Italy meeting

Establishing diplomatic ties with the Vatican is top of Najib's agenda

By T. SELVA
tselvas@thestar.com.my

ROME: All eyes are on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak when he meets Pope Benedict XVI, the head of the Roman Catholic Church today.

The meeting takes place at 11am Italian time at the Papal summer palace in Castel Gandolfo, a small Italian town where the Pope spends the summer.

It is 34°C in Italy and anyone setting foot at the holy destination can experience some sense of serenity, tranquility and peace.

Overlooking the scenic Lake Albano about 25km south-east of Rome, Castel Gandolfo town was voted one of the most beautiful towns in Italy and is a popular spot for tourists.

Najib arrived at Leonardo Da Vinci airport from London yesterday for a two-day working visit to Rome after a packed four-day trip to the United Kingdom where he met Queen Elizabeth 11 at Buckingham Palace and British Prime Minister David Cameron at 10 Downing Street.

But his scheduled meeting with the Pope is closely watched because it is rare for a Muslim leader to have such an engagement.

Najib will be the second Malaysian leader to meet a pope.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad met Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in 2002 for talks focusing on Christian-Muslim relations and the Middle East.

The Christian community in Malaysia is excited over the meeting of the two leaders because it is going to be more than the exchanging of greetings.



Fast and furious: Najib taking a closer look at a Lotus vehicle during a visit to the Group Lotus headquarters in Norwich on Saturday. He arrived in Italy yesterday for a two-day working trip after a packed four-day trip to London. - Bernama

The Prime Minister, who is accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, is leading a delegation to meet the Pope.

He will also hold discussions with the Cardinal Secretary of State and other senior Vatican clergymen.

Others in the delegation are Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Anifah Aman, Ministers in the Prime Minister's Department Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon and Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom,

Plantation Industries and Commodities Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, National Fatwa Council chairman Tan Sri Dr Abdul Shukor Husin and Archbishop Tan Sri Murphy Xavier Pakiam.

Najib's discussion is expected to focus on interfaith issues and his call for a "Global Movement of Moderates" initiative to counter extremism.

Establishing diplomatic ties with the Holy

See is said to be on top of his agenda.

The Vatican looks up to Malaysia as a moderate Muslim nation and the Government also wants to recognise the role of the Holy See in world affairs.

News of Najib being set to hold a dialogue with the Pope has been receiving unusual attention in the social media.

Some viewed the move as a step forward while others raised their eyebrows.

Although Christians make up only 9% of Malaysia's population, the Catholic church is the largest Christian grouping in the world with more than a billion members and it is among the world's oldest and important institutions.

Vatican City is the world's smallest sovereign city-state. Its territory consists of a walled enclave within the city of Rome.

It has an area of approximately 44ha and a population of just over 800.

The Vatican is reported to be the world's richest asset-based place of worship.

The beauty of the Vatican is astonishing and the peacefulness it exudes is so therapeutic. It has been a source of inspiration to Christians and a place of pilgrimage ever since the city was established in 1929 by the Lateran Treaty.

Vatican City is ruled by the Bishop of Rome - the Pope - and the highest state functionaries are Catholic clergymen of various national origins.

Spiritual seekers describe an audience with the Pope as a once in a lifetime experience and an individual must get a calling.

It is said that by placing your foot at such a sacred place, one can experience transformation and enlightenment because of the harmonious force the powerful site vibrates.