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Trump Meeting Najib To Bolster Asia Alliance

President Donald Trump will host Malaysia's premier this week, in a visit that shows how hard his administration is working to court Asian allies to pressure North Korea over its nuclear-weapons program.

By Alan Cullison and Aruna Viswanatha in Washington, D.C., and Ben Otto in Jakarta



Prime Minister Najib Razak at National Day celebrations in Kuala Lumpur last month.

Tuesday's visit by Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak comes as a U.S. Justice Department investigation into the looting of a Malaysian economic-development fund threatens to ensnare much of the country's ruling elite, including Mr. Najib.

While officials say Malaysia's burgeoning economy and trade ties throughout Asia, including North Korea, could make it an important partner in taming Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, the breadth of the corruption case makes cooperation awkward.

The Justice Department has alleged that billions of dollars were misappropriated from the fund, **IMDB Development Bhd.**, or **IMDB**. Justice Department lawyers are suing to seize more than \$1.6 billion in allegedly stolen assets that were used to buy items ranging from luxury real estate in Manhattan and Beverly Hills to jewelry and a private jet.

Mr. Najib, who set up the fund in 2009 aiming to boost the Malaysian economy, hasn't been named in the lawsuits, and he denies any wrongdoing in the affair. But the suit does allege that a "Malaysian Official 1" received hundreds of millions of dollars in siphoned funds. The Wall Street Journal has reported that official is Mr. Najib, citing a person with direct knowledge of the investigation.

The White House declined interview requests last week on the visit, which is expected to include a photo session of the two leaders. People familiar with the case also said the meeting could complicate any future criminal case stemming from the allegations, if defendants in subsequent cases could use any photos of Mr. Najib meeting with Mr. Trump or other senior White House officials in their defense.

Last month, the White House said Mr. Trump was looking forward to discussing with Mr. Najib ways to strengthen ties, calling Malaysia "one of America's closest partners in Southeast Asia."

A Justice Department spokesman declined to comment, but people familiar with the case said the Department wasn't involved with planning Mr. Najib's visit and stressed that the Malaysian leader hadn't been charged.

People familiar with the situation said the White House and State Department are responsible for U.S. diplomacy, but that it was unusual that Mr. Trump would be meeting with Mr. Najib, given the corruption case.

Other U.S. officials said the visit should be worthwhile if only because it will offer a chance to discuss North Korea with Malaysian officials, and press them to do more to crack down on Pyongyang.

Mr. Najib will be the second Southeast Asian leader to visit Mr. Trump in Washington, following a trip in May by Vietnam's prime minister.

Mr. Najib also met with former President Barack Obama—on a 2014 trip by Mr. Obama to Malaysia, for golf that year in Hawaii, and at a 2015 summit—but he never visited Mr. Obama at the White House. Mr. Najib's White House visit is the first by a Malaysian leader since 2004.

With a fast-growing economy and straddling oceangoing trade routes to much of Asia, Malaysia could be a crucial partner to any effort to isolate North Korea.

But for years it has been a conduit for Pyongyang to do business in ways that United Nations investigators say have helped the regime evade global sanctions. A loose regulatory environment makes Malaysia an easy base for illicit transshipment, financing and foreign exchange transactions, experts on North Korea have said.