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# Under a cloud, but meeting with Trump

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KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

Malaysian leader, facing a corruption inquiry, may get political lift from visit

BY RICHARD C. PADOCK

For more than a year, Prime Minister Najib Razak of Malaysia has been under the cloud of a corruption investigation by the United States Department of Justice. On Tuesday, his scheduled visit to see President Trump at the White House may give him a chance in offset the political damage.

The Justice Department concentrated for more than a year on seizing \$1.7 billion in assets, including jewelry, real estate and Hollywood movie rights, that it says Mr. Najib's family members and associates acquired with money diverted from a Malaysian government fund that he headed.

But in August, the department indicated it would shift its focus to a criminal investigation into the missing money, which is estimated to total more than \$2.5 billion. Officials say much of it was laundered through United States financial institutions.

Now, Mr. Trump's invitation to visit the White House comes at a perfect time for Mr. Najib and could give him a much-needed dose of legitimacy at home as a general election nears.

"It's a big gift for him to have the White House invite him," said Cynthia Gabriel, executive director of the Center to Combat Corruption and Cronyism in Kuala Lumpur, adding that she was "really flabbergasted" by the visit.

The two leaders played golf together a few years ago at Mr. Trump's golf club in Bedminster, N.J. Mr. Trump signed a photo of the two of them together, "To my favorite prime minister."

When they meet at the White House, they are expected to discuss the nuclear threat posed by North Korea's ruler, Kim Jong-un, as well as China's growing influence in Southeast Asia. Mr. Trump surely needs an Asian ally who can help on both fronts.

For Mr. Najib, a White House hand-



The Justice Department focused on seizing \$1.7 billion in assets it said Najib Razak's family members and associates acquired with money diverted from a Malaysian fund.

shake will show voters back home that he can set foot on American soil without being jailed, analysts and opposition members said.

"He can say, 'I am not wanted in the United States and I can go there without being arrested,'" said Tony Pua, a member of Parliament and a critic of Mr. Najib.

Simply avoiding arrest on a United States visit might seem a low bar for a world leader.

But in Malaysia, the Justice Department investigation has undermined Mr. Najib's assertions that nearly \$600 million deposited in his personal bank accounts was a gift from an unnamed Saudi donor.

The Justice Department said last year that the source of \$731 million in Mr. Najib's accounts was actually the Malaysian government fund.

Mr. Najib has said that he committed no wrongdoing. His office declined to

comment for this article.

"From a pure public relations point of view, it's a meeting the White House should avoid," said Donald Greenlee, an authority on Southeast Asia with Australian National University. "Even a photo op with Kim Jong-un would be better."

Among those highlighted in the assets seizure cases are Mr. Najib, who is identified in court documents as "Malaysian Official 1"; his wife, Rosmah Mansor,

who is renowned for her foreign shopping excursions; and his stepson, Rizn Aziz, whose company, Red Granite Pictures, produced "The Wolf of Wall Street" and other films.

In the United States, Ms. Mansor may find it best not to wear jewelry that the Justice Department wants to seize, including her \$27.3 million necklace with a 22-carat, pink diamond pendant, or the 27 gold necklaces and bracelets that she acquired in Los Angeles for \$1.3 million.

Also caught up in the scandal are the actor Leonardo DiCaprio, who received more than \$12 million in artwork, and the model Miranda Kerr, who received more than \$6 million in diamond jewelry. They received the items as gifts from Jho Loo, a friend of Mr. Aziz who played a key role in establishing the Malaysian fund.

The department says the money used to acquire the property and luxury goods was diverted from One Malaysia Development Berhad, the investment fund that Mr. Najib headed.

Last month, the Justice Department filed a motion to stay the forfeiture cases so that they would not have "an adverse effect on the government's ability to conduct the related criminal investigation." A hearing is scheduled for Sept. 18 in Los Angeles.

While Mr. Najib might wish for Mr. Trump to halt the Justice Department investigation, that would seem unlikely given the department's independence. After all, Mr. Trump has been unable to stop an investigation into Russian election meddling that is headed by Robert S. Mueller III.

"This is a meeting of two leaders who both have legal problems, so it is bound to raise eyebrows," said Wan Saimul Was Jan, chief executive of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs in Kuala Lumpur. "If they have a one-on-one meeting, no one really knows what transpires in that session."

Mahathir Mohamad, 92, who served for 22 years as prime minister and is now a leader of the opposition, said Malaysia has turned into a "dictatorship" under Mr. Najib where the rule of law is no longer enforced.

Mr. Najib controls the media and nearly every aspect of government, he said, and critics are arrested and detained without due process.

But Mr. Najib's visit to the White House will not give him the legitimacy he seeks because of Mr. Trump's own standing, said Mr. Mahathir, who was seen as authoritarian when he was in power.

"Whether he supports Najib or not, he is not going to make much of an impact. If he says Najib is a great leader, people will say, 'Well, that's Trump. We don't take him seriously.'"