

'China is vital neighbour and Malaysia has no issues with it'

KUALA LUMPUR: China remains an important neighbour to Malaysia, says Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Responding to a question if the United States had tried to dictate anything related to Malaysia's relations with China, Anwar said Malaysia had no issues with China.

"We did explain that China is an important neighbour, and we've not had issues with them. And I think it is our duty, not only Malaysia's but Asean's, to be independent and observe the principle of neutrality and do what is best to focus on economic development, and therefore, increasing trade and enhancing investments.

"That is being duly conveyed to the US," he said in an interview with Al Jazeera aired yesterday.

Anwar, who is also finance minister, said the US had not openly asked Malaysia to downgrade its relationship with China.

"I know there have been mis-sives, but we are not going to respond to that, because America cumulatively still is the largest investor in Malaysia, and new investments are coming in.

"There is no bias in favour or against any country," he added.

Anwar said China's sovereignty claim over the South China Sea was an issue, but not necessarily a tense development.

He said although one or two Asean countries had raised con-

cern, Malaysia would continue to use bilateral mechanisms to discuss and negotiate with China.

Anwar also addressed US allegations of ship-to-ship transfers of sanctioned Iranian oil taking place in Malaysian waters, saying the country was ready to cooperate with the authorities if evidence was shown.

"Our position is that sanctions can only be decided by the United Nations. If they (the US) have evidence, then of course we have to stop (Malaysian entities from engaging in activities banned by UN sanctions).

"This is because we want to be part of the international community that accepts ground rules."

On May 9, US Treasury Under-

secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson said the US believed that waters off Malaysia and in the region were being used as a point for selling Iranian oil, which circumvents US sanctions on Iran.

On another issue, Anwar defended his engagements with Hamas, describing them as purely for diplomatic and political purposes.

Anwar, who was recently in Doha, Qatar, had met with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and former Hamas chairman Khaled Mashal.

"I'm not here to defend excesses by anyone. Why the hypocrisy of condemning Oct 7 (attacks) by Hamas, but being mute on 60 years of atrocities against the Palestinian people?"

"I think therefore we need to explain that this engagement is purely diplomatic and political.

"It is of benefit, as the Qataris have done, to secure the release of hostages through contact and engagement. You don't need to agree with everything they do, but I think a principled stance would help.

"Someone has to engage with Hamas, whether you like it or not. It does represent some portion of the Palestinian people in Gaza and you cannot deny that."

Asked if the US was pressuring him to change his policy or stance on Israel, Anwar said: "Well, probably obliquely. But because we maintain good relations with the US and we continue to do so."