

Obama Touched by Malaysia's Hospitality, Warmth

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KUALA LUMPUR, May 5 (Bernama) -- It may have been a short visit for Barack Obama, but the United States (US) president was overwhelmed by Malaysia's hospitality and touched by its people's warmth and friendliness.

This was disclosed by US Ambassador to Malaysia Joseph Y. Yun at a media roundtable in the US Embassy here today, who said Obama left Malaysia with a tinge of memorable and meaningful nostalgia.

"When Obama left, he asked me to convey his thanks to the prime minister (Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak) who was such a gracious host, and to a number of ministers, including (Foreign Minister Datuk Seri) Anifah Aman and (Youth and Sports Minister) Khairy Jamaluddin who was also the minister-in-attendance, for playing a big part of this visit.

"He really asked me to convey (Obama's thanks) to the hosts for their warm welcome and being engaging throughout the whole visit. Obama was very much moved by the welcome shown to him wherever he went, by Malaysians, students at Universiti Malaya, young entrepreneurs at Cyberjaya and civil society leaders," he said.

The three-day visit, beginning April 26, to this Southeast Asian nation of 30 million people - part of Obama's four-nation tour of Asia - is a first by a sitting US president in 48 years since President Lyndon B. Johnson's trip back in 1966.

Yun said Obama was impressed to see crowds lining up to catch a glimpse of the US president at the routes he travelled during his stay in Malaysia. From his personal point of view, Yun said Obama and Najib shared a very good relationship, familiarity with each other, and almost like two old friends meeting after some time.

"They have met many times on both multilateral and bilateral settings and whenever I saw those two interacting together, I am reminded that they know each other so well, that I don't have to brief the president anything at all," he said, adding that Obama's visit was a successful one.

He added that Obama had a personal familiarisation with Malaysia, whereby he remained comfortable in terms of knowledge and relationship, which the president would like to build between the US and the region.

"His personal history matters a lot, for example, during the state banquet, he recollected memories of how his mother collected batik and his half-Indonesian sister's in-laws are Malaysians.

"Even during the small bilateral lunch at Seri Perdana, Obama was telling people how nasi goreng should be cooked, and the best way of cooking it. He also joked about durian, that he (Obama) had tried it several times and (that durian is) not his favourite fruit," he said.

With such a unique friendship shared between Obama and Najib, Yun said they both brought the US and Malaysia relations to a comprehensive partnership, with greater collaboration on the economy, security, education, science, technology and other fields.

"With this new phase of ties, the leaders very much left us with homework such as how do we make progress on visa waiver programme, how to go about expanding education programmes, and lastly, how to cooperate outside Malaysia and within Asean," he said.

Elaborating on the US' Visa Waiver Programme, Yun said Malaysia had to meet a set of qualifications as outlined by US laws and provisions, such as the visa refusal rate had to be about three per cent, Malaysia must report stolen and lost passports to Interpol and exchange data on terrorists and criminals.

"Although Malaysia has met some conditions such as machine-readable passport, allowing Americans in without visas, so, we are making some progress but it will take probably a little time to be qualified for the programme," he explained.

However, he said no date was set for a series of consultations and technical briefings to carry out a proper assessment on the visa waiver programme. Citizens from countries listed under the visa waiver programme are allowed to travel and stay in the US for a maximum of 90 days without a visa.

Malaysia's visa refusal rate stands at five per cent.

On Malaysia's Chairmanship of Asean 2015, Yun said US was looking forward both diplomatically and economically, and would contribute significantly towards the future direction of Asean and its bid to become the next regional giant.

"US has been supportive of Asean as a grouping of nations, (that) is why we joined the East Asia Summit, by offering technical assistance to Asean on single market, energy issues. It will be an opportunity for US to make progress on so many things," he said.

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