

We're closer than ever, pledges SBY

Patrick Walters | September 11, 2007

INDONESIAN President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono says his country's relationship with Australia has reached a high founded on mutual trust.

Dr Yudhoyono said recent bilateral agreements, including the Lombok Treaty on security co-operation, had altered the geopolitical relationship between Indonesia and Australia.

"We have significantly recalibrated our relations - for better, not worse - and that process of recalibration is still going on today," he told a dinner in Sydney organised by Asialink.

Dr Yudhoyono urged Australians to make Indonesia their "second home" and expressed the hope that thousands of Indonesian students would come to Australia every year to study.

He wound up his three-day visit to Sydney yesterday with a lunch at Kirribilli House hosted by John Howard. The two leaders had a discussion lasting 90 minutes that focused on climate change, defence, counter-terror co-operation and regional security issues.

They agreed the Sydney Declaration on climate change had created the momentum for progress later this year on drawing up an international framework to reduce carbon emissions, as well as bridging the gap between developed and developing nations.

Senior government sources said Mr Howard raised the plight of the Bali Nine with Dr Yudhoyono. Six of the nine Australians imprisoned for drug offences face the death penalty.

Mr Howard agreed with Dr Yudhoyono that the bilateral relationship was in extremely good shape, noting the closer co-operation fostered between the two governments in recent years.

The Prime Minister congratulated Dr Yudhoyono on the arrest of key Jemaah Islamiah leaders by Indonesian police.

In his Asialink speech on Sunday evening, Dr Yudhoyono said 2007 had been a special year. He had become the first Indonesian leader to visit Australia twice in one presidential term.

"I wanted to break the old mindset about Australia, which was symbolised by the fact there had only been three visits by Indonesian presidents to Australia in 60 years of our nationhood," Dr Yudhoyono said.

"I am happy to tell you that between Australia and Indonesia there is basically a relationship of trust. Both sides have earned that trust and both are striving to deserve it."

But he warned that mutual misperceptions and prejudices between two vastly different societies could be fanned by the antics of populist politicians and a "few sensationalist members of the mass media on both sides".

"Hence, there is such a thing as Australophobia in Indonesia," Dr Yudhoyono said. "Even some very intelligent Indonesians are afflicted with it."

"This stems from the perception that Australians are so enamoured with their imagined superiority they meddle in the internal affairs of their neighbours."

Dr Yudhoyono said that in Australia there was a perception of Indonesia as a militaristic society with aggressive designs on its neighbours, and as a society that bred Muslim terrorists.

"What has saved us from the tyranny of stereotypes is a stronger realisation of our ... shared interests. We have simply realised we need each other."