

TOURS *Mahathir - overseas*
Stepping Out *trips*

Until recently, the building of international bridges had not rated high on Malaysia's agenda. Largely responsible for its low priority was a host of pressing domestic matters taking up much of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's time. Amid campaigning for last year's general elections, the PM was putting out political fires in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. He then faced an unprecedented challenge within his own party, the United Malays National Organisation, only just retaining its leadership during the bitter party polls in April.

whereby government departments were instructed to purchase British goods only if absolutely necessary and if similar products were unavailable elsewhere. This occurred after the London Stock Exchange changed its rules in response to a Malaysian dawn raid on Guthrie, a listed conglomerate with plantation assets in Malaysia. Instead, Mahathir encouraged Malaysians to "look East" towards Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, urging them to take up the work ethics of these countries.

But bilateral relations between Malaysia and Britain have been slowly improving since. Mahathir made an informal visit to London in 1983 and two years later Margaret Thatcher turned up in Kuala Lumpur. The distance between the two countries seems to have narrowed further with Mahathir's latest call. Once he got to Britain, he wasted little time wooing investors. "Lurid stories have been told about Japanese and Koreans having exclusive rights to contracts for projects and supplies to Malaysia," he said at an investment seminar in London. He assured British businessmen that Malaysia did not practise discrimination and would welcome their investments. "We buried the 'Buy British Last' policy long ago," declared the prime minister.

Malaysian officials believe they made some progress in mending fences with Britain. Mahathir himself said he got the impression British businessmen "[desired] a closer relationship with Malaysia." Indeed, some deals appeared to be on the cards. A British firm said it would buy 48,000 of Malaysia's Proton Saga cars, while the Malaysians inspected an advanced turbojet made by British Aerospace for possible use on their domestic routes. Still, many old disputes remain unresolved, among them Malaysia's yawning trade deficit with Britain and the long-standing request for more weekly flights for national carrier Malaysian Airlines System.

But since then, Mahathir, 61, has had somewhat of a breather at home and has managed to step out. Recently, he presided over the International Conference on Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking in Vienna. And last week, he and a 38-member entourage completed a fortnight-long tour of Britain, Hungary and the Soviet Union. "Foreign policy had been one weak area in Mahathir's administration," says Murugasu Pathmanaban, a University of Malaya academic, "but he is plugging that gap now by courting investments from the West and increased trade with the Soviet bloc."

The stop in Britain, a major trading partner, was Mahathir's first official visit to the country. When he came to power in 1981, he quickly made it clear that London was not one of his favourite destinations. He launched a "Buy British Last" policy,

Mahathir spent the most time in the Soviet Union. In Moscow, he met Soviet boss Mikhail Gorbachev, the first ASEAN leader to do so. They discussed the occupation of Cambodia by Vietnam, a top Moscow ally, and the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Mahathir called for withdrawal of troops in both cases. The balance of trade, heavily in Malaysia's favour, was broached in meetings with other officials. Possible imports to narrow the gap: low-priced Soviet helicopters. In a way, Mahathir outlined the overall purpose of his three-nation tour when he stopped over in Hungary. "Although we are small countries, we insist that our voices should be heard," he said in Budapest. "We do not believe that giants own this earth and that others have no role to play." ■

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