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MAHATHIR SAYS VISIT TO VIETNAM HIS BEST ABROAD

Mahathir-Vietnam

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KUALA LUMPUR, April 24 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who returned from a five-day official visit to Vietnam, said today his trip was the best one yet of his missions abroad. (P)

It was a highly successful trip not only in terms of, fostering close government-to-government ties but also bringing together the business communities of the two countries, he added.

Speaking to reporters at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, he described the outcome of the visit as +beyond expectations+.

+There is so much business activity, not only small business but also big enterprises and the wide scope of opportunities to-enhance bilateral economic relations,+ he said.

The delegation of Malaysian businessmen who accompanied him on tie visit succeeded in concluding more than 20 agreements with the 'Vietnamese private sector in various fields-of business, he added. -- more

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Dr.Mahathir said: +The situation in Vietnam is not like before. Then, (it) did not allow private enterprise but now it is in the process of innovation and they allow all kinds of private business.+

The country's economic growth was thriving, especially in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, he added.

He said the visit gave the Malaysian private sector representatives an opportunity to identify the types of goods they could import to Malaysia and areas of services and investments they could go into.

+In general, the visit was highly successful. In fact, 'I can say it is the best of my visits (abroad) where I have taken along-Malaysian businessmen and entrepreneurs,+ he added.

He said the Vietnamese government offered Malaysian entrepreneurs suitable areas which could be developed as 'Export Processing' Zones, similar to the Free Trade' Zones in Malaysia.

+They have set aside many areas. Whichever we want we can choose to set up export industries,+ he added. -- more

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Asked if the lack of hard currency in Vietnam would dampen the flow of business between the two countries, he said: +I am of the view that this will not be a big problem. Firstly, we must identify goods that we can buy and, even today, we are buying more than we sell to Vietnam.+

Malaysia would also have counter-trade and bilateral payment arrangements with Vietnam, he added.

Dr Mahathir said in the context of government relations his visit had led to understanding towards seeking a solution over their overlapping claims to the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

+We have agreed to peaceful negotiations on this issue,+ he added.

On the future of the 12,000 Vietnamese boat people remaining in Malaysia, he said Vietnam was prepared to take back those who wished to return voluntarily.

Dr Mahathir was accompanied on the visit by Datuk Seri Datin Paduka Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Minister of International Trade and Industry Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz.

They were greeted at the airport by Deputy Prime Minister Ghafar Baba, Cabinet Ministers and senior government officials. -- Bernama

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