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Mahathir (wrap-up)

MAHATHIR'S PHILIPPINE VISIT A BIG SUCCESS

From Azman Utang

DAVAO CITY (Philippines), Feb 6 (Bernama) -- Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad flew home from this capital of Mindanao province today, ending his official visit to the Philippines which achieved in four days what have eluded the two countries in decades.

Dr Mahathir simply won the hearts of the Filipinos -- politicians, businessmen, the media and the man-in-the street -- going by their outpouring of admiration at various functions, in the press (which seldom has nice words to say about politicians) and the thousands who turned out to give him rousing welcome.

Among other praises, he was described as a "really true and inspiring Asian leader".

Dr Mahathir's choice of this once-troubled province in Southern Philippines as the last leg of his visit gives added significance to his mission, sending strong signals of Malaysia's support to the East Asean Growth Area (EAGA) proposed by the Philippines to boost economic linkages between Mindanao, East Malaysia, East Indonesia and Brunei.

He drove home one clear message in his various speeches -- the time is now ripe to sink political differences between Malaysia and the Philippines for the sake of economic prosperity.--more AU OS

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Dr Mahathir makes it known that Malaysia, with one of Asia's highest economic growth rates, is only too eager to help the Philippines out in economic development so it can catch up with the rest of the pack in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

As usual, Dr Mahathir does not mince his words, and this, too, wowed the Filipinos.

The group of top businessmen he brought along signed nine memoranda of understanding (MOU) to invest over 10 billion pesos ((P1=RM10) in the Philippine. The projects range from power generation, water, infrastructure to hotels and resorts.

The contentious issue of Manila's claim on Sabah -- which has chilled relations between both nations for over 30 years -- was brushed aside and not raised at all in talks between Dr Mahathir and Philippine President Fidel Ramos.

After their bilateral meeting on Thursday shortly following Dr Mahathir's arrival, both leaders met again the following day -- this time specifically to discuss plans by Proton to assemble the national car in the Philippines.--more AU OS

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Dr Mahathir said he was touched by the hospitality of the Filipino people -- thousands lined up roads to the airports at Subic Bay which he visited yesterday and even bigger crowds greeted him at the Davao International Airport today.

In a speech to business and community leaders here, the Prime Minister said: "We believe political issues become less important if countries become prosperous. If the people are prosperous they don't like instability and insecurity which will adversely affect economic prosperity".

"It is easier for us to work together for economic development than to solve political problems which sometimes defy solution," he said in a veiled reference to the Sabah claim.

"After 37 years of independence, this is the first time that a Malaysia Prime Minister is visiting the Philippines. Last year, President Ramos made a state visit to Malaysia to exchange views on the economic development of our two countries".

He said Asean countries had become the fastest growing economies because of experience-sharing which enabled them to avoid making mistakes made by other countries.--more AU OS

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One of the mistakes is for developing countries to keep out foreign investors for the sake of maintaining their nationalism and independence.

In Asean's case, foreign investors need not necessarily come from outside but from within Asean itself. Asean groups Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines and Brunei.

"There should be cross-border investment and trade and for this Asean countries need not look further for sources of investment. But they must create the environment conducive to investment. If they don't, chances are investors will go elsewhere which are also wooing investors to create jobs and prosperity," he added.

Dr Mahathir said EAGA would get full support from Malaysia which had already appointed a team of officials to expedite its take-off.

He sees in Mindanao a region full of potentials not only in agriculture and tourism but other industries, adding that with its big labour force it is better to resite new labour-intensive industries here.--more AU OS

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More people are going to buy products from these newly-growing territories and boost further intra-Asean trade.

He said focus should be on stimulating Malaysia-Philippine trade which is still very small but with EAGA, both sides can identify what one can buy and sell to each other.

Paul Dominquez, the presidential assistant for Mindanao, in a briefing for Dr Mahathir said President Ramos pays special attention to Mindanao's development in order to address the root causes of past insurgencies.

Troubles in the province in the early 1970's caused tens of thousands of Filipinos to flee to Sabah across the Sulu Sea where most remain till this day.

EAGA is no rhetoric. Dominquez said senior officials would meet here next month to formalise an MOU. This will be followed by the launch of an East Asean Business Council here in May. --more AU OS

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Turning to Dr Mahathir, he said: "Your historic visit is the strongest signal yet and will have a great long-term impact on the development of EAGA. You have not only brought Malaysian officials and investors to Mindanao, you have focused the world's attention to Mindanao and EAGA".

"Dr Mahathir, you have injected a much welcomed shot of adrenalin into EAGA initiative. History will reveal that you truly made the difference, he addd."

EAGA will integrate over 40 million people into a vibrant consumer market through cross-border trade and investment by improving transporation and communication linkages within th sub-region.

Earlier in a speech on arrival at Davao airport tarmac, Dr Mahathir said he was very happy to be in Mindanao to be with "our brothers, sisters and cousins".

Several times during the visit, he said the Filipinos and Malaysians were basically the same people, coming from the same stock whose roots could be traced to the Yunan province in China.--more AU OS

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Since ancient times, there have been exchanges of visits between both sides, but because they are separated by the seas, they have not been able to have the kind of ties which they should have.

"We have many things in common. I have come here to learn more about this part of the Philippines to bring about closer ties. If we succeed in establishing the EAGA, we can look forward to greater prosperity," he said to the cheers of 3,000 people who waited at the tarmac to welcome him.

Dr Maathir was presented with the key to the city by Davao Mayor Rudy Deterte.

Later at a hotel, he witnessed the signing of another MOU, this time between Malaysia's Pilgrims Management and Fund Board (Tabung Haji) and the Philippine Haj and Endowment Foundation.

Both agencies have agreed to cooperate to enable Muslims from Southern Philippines to perform the Haj in a systematic way as being handled by Tabung Haji.--Bernama

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