

PM: Understanding key to better ties

By S. Jayakrishnan

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today called for closer interaction and understanding between Australia and Malaysia to ensure peace and harmony and to dispel misconceived notions.

He said cultivating understanding at an early age was important to ensure the removal of barriers.

"Indeed, understanding comes from regular interaction between people at all levels. Close interaction breaks down barriers and welds people together.

"Close interaction with an open mind helps to dispel misconceived notions, and shift the paradigm towards constructive understanding.

"Understanding builds friendship and contributes to peace and harmony," he said at the inaugural dinner of the Malaysia-Australia Foundation here tonight.

He said with the globalisation of economies and the move towards free trade and open regionalism, at least by countries in the Asia Pacific region, by bringing down trade barriers, great opportunities awaited Ma-

laysian and Australians alike to work together in partnership for mutual benefit.

Dr Mahathir said the Malaysia-Australia Foundation has a board comprising very successful and eminent men from the Government, business and professional sectors who shared a common link — having been educated in Australia.

"I understand the foundation was established by its own desire to repay in a small way the generosity and hospitality of the Australian people."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was keen to be an international centre of excellence in higher education.

He said Malaysia's multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural society presented a unique environment in Asia which Australians could study to understand Asia.

"It may help your wish to be more identified with Asia and Asians. Australians are welcome to do this in Malaysia.

"Perhaps, it can be a Malaysian contribution in return for the educational opportunities you have afforded us."

Dr Mahathir said he was

happy that the foundation was committed towards promoting understanding between peoples of the two nations and added that despite varied culture, religion and history there were many common grounds upon which relations between the two countries had been firmly based.

He said Australia was closely associated with the establishment of the Federation of Malaysia and also had a close defence relationship well before Malaysia's independence.

Furthermore, both countries shared broadly common legislative, legal and administrative traditions as well as people-to-people links through education and business apart from being members of the Commonwealth and various other international forums with common aspirations and goals.

Dr Mahathir said two-way trade between both countries totalled RM4.74 billion in 1993, an increase of 23.7 per cent over the previous year's figure of RM2.7 billion.

He said Malaysia was now Australia's third largest Asean trading partner and the 11th largest export mar-

ket.

Australia's exports to Malaysia have grown at an annual rate of over 12 per cent in five years up to 1993 while Australian exports to Malaysia in 1993 accelerated to 37.8 per cent to RM2.87 billion while imports rose to RM1.89 billion, up 7.2 per cent over the previous year.

"Australian investment in Malaysia has rapidly expanded from RM156 million in 1989 to more than RM2.7 billion in 1993. Australia ranked as the fourth largest investor in Malaysia in 1993."

Dr Mahathir said he was pleased that more than 200 Australian companies had already established themselves in Malaysia through joint ventures or subsidiary/branch ventures.

He added that one of the most valuable and enduring bonds between both countries had been the link through education.

"The reservoir of goodwill and understanding accumulated through Malaysians living, playing, studying and working in Australia with and among Australians must be a wonderful ingredient to cement the relations between Malaysia and Australia."