

19 DEC 1996

Mahathir-India

MAHATHIR BEGINS OFFICIAL VISIT TO INDIA

By: Zainoor Sulaiman

NEW DELHI, Dec 19 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrived here today to begin a four-day official visit aimed at strengthening relations with the Indian new United Front government.

Heading a high-level delegation which includes three cabinet ministers and leading corporate leaders, the Prime Minister and his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, were met on arrival at Palam Air Force Base here by Minister of State for Commerce B.B. Ramaya and senior officials from the Indian foreign office and the Malaysian High Commission here.

Indian Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda will officially greet Dr Mahathir at the official welcoming ceremony tomorrow at the forecourt of Rashtrapati Bhavan, the Presidential residence and administrative complex.

The cabinet members accompanying the prime minister in his third visit here are Transport Minister Datuk Seri Ling Liong Sik, Works Minister Datuk Seri S.Samy Vellu, Energy, Telecommunications and Posts Minister Datuk Leo Moggie and Deputy Foreign Minister Dr Leo Michael Toyad.

The 40-member Malaysian business group includes Malaysia Airlines chairman Tan Sri Tajuddin Ramli, Renong executive chairman Tan Sri Halim Saad, Bank Bumiputra chief executive officer Datuk Abdul Aziz Othman, Berjaya Group chairman Tan Sri Vincent Tan, Business Focus chairman Datuk Amin Shah Omar, Country Heights managing director Datuk Lee Kim Yew, Globe Silk Store executive chairman Tan Sri T.J.Kishu and Malaysian Palm Oil Promotion Council chief executive officer Tan Sri Dr Yusof Hashim.

Tomorrow, he will receive the Jawaharal Nehru Award for International Understanding for 1984, the highlight of his visit.

Conferring the prestigious Nehru award to the Prime Minister is seen by diplomatic circles here as a special Indian recognition for his contribution and role in promoting unity among developing countries.

Apart from meeting his counterpart, Dr Mahathir will also call on President Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma and Vice President K.R. Narayanan.

During his meeting with Indian leaders, the prime minister is expected to review the bilateral cooperation which has been intensified in recent years and other regional and international issues of interest to both countries.

India is expected to take up the issue of its possible participation in the Asia-Europe meeting during the bilateral talks.

Dr Mahathir will address the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) before witnessing the signing of about 30 agreements and MoUs between Malaysian and Indian companies.

He will also inaugurate the Asean-India Lecture series.

Malaysian businessmen say they are keen to participate in the infrastructure projects including highways, telecommunications, ports and power projects. The new United Front government wants to make them the central plank of its Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) programme.

However they are puzzled over the snags and the political debates in Parliament and among parties in the ruling coalition.

Bilateral trade has jumped nearly three-fold from US\$477 million (RM1.2 billion) in 1993-94 to US\$1.2 billion in 1995-96.

Malaysia recorded a trade surplus of US\$471 million in 1995-96 compared with a marginal surplus of US\$1.2 million in 1993-94.

Malaysia's principal exports to India include palm oil, wood and wood products, metal scrap, non-ferrous metals, natural rubber, machinery and

professional and optical instruments.

Malaysia imports among other things, meat, machinery and instruments, transport equipment, cotton yarn fabrics and rice to India.

Dr Mahathir will also fly to Bangalore, the central part of southern India, where he will visit the Hindustani Aeronautical Ltd and the Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro). -- BERNAMA

ZS RM