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Burdon - visit

NEW ZEALAND LOOKS FORWARD TO DR MAHATHIR'S VISIT

KUALA LUMPUR, March 15 (Bernama) -- New Zealand is looking forward to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit later this month and regards it as "a most significant event" in relations between the two countries, a New Zealand minister said today.

Philip Burdon, Minister for Trade Negotiations, said New Zealand considered its relationship with Malaysia as very important.

"We look forward to welcoming Dr Mahathir and showing him some of the factors that we think make our two countries such good partners," he said at a breakfast meeting with local businessmen here.

Dr Mahathir is scheduled to make a four-day official visit to New Zealand from March 25. He last visited the South Pacific island nation in November last year to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM).

Burdon said Malaysia was New Zealand's largest export market in Southeast Asia (NZ\$396 million in 1995) and the second largest source of imports from the region after Singapore.

Although the trade balance was in New Zealand's favour, imports had been increasing steadily and last year leapt by over half to reach NZ\$232 million (NZ\$1 = RM1.70).

Malaysia was also the second largest Asean investor in New Zealand.

"We would welcome more investment from Malaysian companies and individuals in areas of mutual interest. The partnerships with Malaysia will be a dynamic factor for growth," Burdon said.

Malaysia and New Zealand have a long history of people-to-people contact and have developed close cooperation in various fields, including military training and education.

New Zealand's military training cooperation with Malaysia is the second largest after Australia. The three countries together with Britain and Singapore are members of the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA).

Apart from this, more than 13,000 Malaysians have been educated in New Zealand.

Burdon said New Zealand was now reaping the rewards of over a decade of major economic reforms.

The country had been achieving high rates of economic growth with an average of 5.2 percent per annum for the last three years.

" This is a remarkable turnaround from our performance throughout the 1970s and early 80s when the country averaged just 1.4 percent growth which was less than half the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development's average," he said.

Speaking to reporters later, Burdon said that while it was undeniable that New Zealand had a European heritage, it saw itself as a West Pacific entity and a society that was constantly evolving.

He said it would be inappropriate and unfair to categorise New Zealand as European just as it was improper to regard Peru as Spanish or Brazil as Portuguese.

New Zealand, just like Australia, has been making efforts to integrate more and more with Asia.

In this context Dr Mahathir's visit is seen as most significant by Wellington. -- Bernama

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