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Close, extensive ties improving steadily

ON the occasion of the forty-eighth Republic Day of India, on behalf of the Government and the people of India and on my own behalf, I wish to extend greetings and good wishes to readers of the New Straits Times.

The relations between India and Malaysia which have traditionally been warm, close and extensive, are improving steadily and expanding into new areas of co-operation.

At the political level, there have been several visits in the recent past from India including that of H.E. Mr I.K. Gujral, External Affairs Minister of India, to Malaysia and vice-versa, the most important of which has been the visit of the Honourable Prime Minister of Malaysia Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to India during December 1996 to receive the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding and the subsequent bilateral visit. This highly successful visit is likely to give further impetus to the growth of relations between the two countries.

Malaysia is now one of the largest trading partners of India and for Malaysia also, India has emerged as an important trading partner. New items of import and export are being added and given the proximity and the complementarity of the two economies, I hope that the volume of trade between the two countries would keep increasing.

There are at present more than 20 Indian joint-venture companies in Malaysia. A large number of Malaysian companies have been issued licences to set up joint-venture companies in India. Malaysia is also emerging as one of the top investors in India.

There has been close cultural affinity between the two countries. 1996 saw a larger number of tourists travelling to and from India. A need for expanding the existing air links has been felt and is being addressed by the two countries.

A number of cultural troupes have been visiting each other's country for staging performances which are well received by the public. New areas of co-operation in the field of culture, science and technology are being explored.

India continues to extend the Indian Technical and Economic co-operation (ITEC) Programme and the Technical Co-operation Scheme of Colombo Plan to Malaysia under which Malaysian nationals are given training in Indian establishments.

Malaysia has also recently agreed to extend the Malaysian Technical Co-operation Programme (MTCP) to India under which Indian nationals would soon start receiving training in Malaysian establishments. The co-operation between the two countries in this field is a concrete demonstration of South-South co-operation.

At the global level India continues to actively participate in various international fora like the UN, Commonwealth, Non-Aligned Movement, G-77, G-15 and other international organisations. In these fora, India and Malaysia have worked closely to promote the interests of developing countries.

India's relations with the major powers and the rapidly growing economies in the world were considerably strengthened. India at the bilateral level is doing whatever is possible within its capacity to extend co-operation to the other developing countries.

The Indian Government is making continuous efforts to improve its ties with its neighbours. India has unilaterally reduced tariff for a very

large number of items imported from neighbouring countries including Pakistan.

The agreement with Bangladesh on sharing the waters of Ganges River has created a better climate for strengthening of ties between the two countries. The visit of President of China to India in November 1996 has given a new impetus to our bilateral relations. Relations with Nepal and Sri Lanka have been further strengthened.

SAARC is emerging as an important fora in strengthening ties among the South Asian countries.

Last year had been an eventful one for India. General elections were held to elect new Government at the Centre (Federal Government) and in several states. Election process was also successfully completed in the state of Jammu & Kashmir.

At the Federal level and in several states new parties have assumed office. This peaceful transition of authority is a tribute to the strength and the vitality of the democratic system in India.

On the economic front the gains of the previous years were not only consolidated but were also expanded. There has been growth in investment, industrial production and foreign trade.

The new Government stands committed to the liberalisation of the economy as there is an overall consensus on this issue in India.

In science and technology, India demonstrated its capability in several fields. India would be happy to work closely with Malaysia, in keeping with the importance being attached to this sector in the context of Vision 2020.

India as in the past likes to share its experiences with the other developing countries in the spirit of South-South co-operation. The strong commitment of Malaysia and India to G-15, India's closer association with Asean, consequent to its becoming a Full Dialogue Partner and complementarities between the two countries in the field of trade and investment, I am sure, would lead to further expansion and strengthening of the already close and cordial ties between the Governments and the peoples of the two countries, in the years to come.

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