

04/04/1997

Dr M begins 5-day visit to Kuwait, Bahrain tomorrow

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will begin his five-day official visit to Kuwait and Bahrain on Saturday to provide fresh impetus to bilateral relations and develop new avenues for co-operation.

Dr Mahathir's itinerary will begin with a three-day state visit to Kuwait, an invitation from the Emir and Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

The Prime Minister's entourage will include wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, Terengganu Menteri Besar Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Wan Ahmad and several leading businessmen.

Dr Mahathir last visited Kuwait in January, 1987, when he attended the Organisation of Islamic Conference summit.

While in the Gulf Emirate, Dr Mahathir will visit the Kuwait Liberation Tower and the Seif Palace which houses the Emir's palace, the Government complex and the residential area for its Cabinet ministers.

Dr Mahathir will also attend a state luncheon hosted by the Emir at the Bayan Palace and an official banquet to be held in his honour.

The banquet will be hosted by Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Kuwaiti Minister for Foreign Affairs.

In the morning of the second day, Dr Mahathir will attend the signing of the Double Taxation Agreement which is among the highlights of his visit.

In the evening, the Prime Minister will attend a reception with Kuwaiti and Malaysian businessmen, followed by a dialogue session. He will also deliver a talk at the function.

At the end of the day, he will have dinner with the Malaysian community at the residence of the Malaysian ambassador in Qortuba.

The only other Malaysian Prime Minister to visit Kuwait was the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein who went there in 1975.

Then, both nations signed three agreements to strengthen bilateral ties - the Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement, the Cultural and Scientific Agreement and the Trade Agreement.

In 1986, the Air Services Agreement was signed followed by the Investment Guarantee Agreement the following year.

Under the Air Services Agreement, Kuwait Airways was given landing rights to fly twice a week to Kuala Lumpur.

Malaysia Airlines used to fly into Kuwait as a stop over to London but temporarily terminated the service during the Gulf War.

The Kuwait Emir last visited Malaysia in 1980.

Kuwait is Malaysia's fifth largest trading partner in West Asia after the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan.

Malaysian exports to Kuwait in 1996 was valued at RM175 million while imports totalled RM94 million. Trade between both countries has been in Malaysia's favour since 1992.

Malaysia's main exports to Kuwait are jewellery, heating and cooling equipment, television receivers and timber products while its main imports are crude and refined petroleum.

Dr Mahathir will leave for Bahrain on April 7. His last official visit there was in March 1982.

The late Tun Razak had visited Bahrain in 1975 where both countries signed the Economic and Technical, Cultural and Scientific Cooperation

agreements.

In 1994, Malaysia signed the Air Services Agreement with Bahrain which allowed its national carrier to fly into Kuala Lumpur twice a week and vice versa.

Dr Mahathir will call on the Emir of Bahrain Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa. In the evening, he will attend a state banquet hosted by the Emir.

On April 8, Dr Mahathir will address the Gulf Economic Forum.

The conference will cover economic topics concerning the six Gulf Cooperation Council states, including reforms, capital markets and attempts to diversify their oil-reliant economies.

The six GCC members are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The forum, "GCC Strategies and Global Relationships At The Turn Of The Century," is expected to attract hundreds of officials and business leaders from the Gulf, Asia, Africa, Europe and the United States.

Apart from Dr Mahathir, other participants include Bank of England governor Eddie George, Arab League secretary-general Dr Ahmed Asmat Abdul Maguid, former US Trade Secretary Mickey Kantor and former South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha.

In the afternoon, Dr Mahathir will attend lunch hosted by his counterpart Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa.

Malaysia's exports to Bahrain last year totalled about RM55 million. The main exports were palm oil, timber products and electronic equipment.

Our imports from Bahrain totalled about RM45 million with aluminium and iron ore products and aircraft equipment being the main items.

Dr Mahathir and his entourage will return home on April 9.

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