

08/05/1997

Dr M conferred S. Africa's highest award

Azmi M. Anshar in Cape Town

FOR his relentless support to South Africa in its struggle for democracy, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was yesterday conferred the country's highest award for foreign leaders.

Dr Mahathir received the award from South African President Nelson Mandela in a simple ceremony that underscored the close ties between the two countries and the vital role Malaysia now plays in South Africa's socio-economic transition.

The Order of Good Hope Class 1: Grand Cross (Gold) is awarded to a person who, through his personal efforts, has contributed towards the wellbeing of the people of South Africa.

"... and who thereby deserves the respect and recognition of the Republic of South Africa," according to the citation read moments before the conferment.

The ceremony, which was held at the doorsteps facing the garden at the Genanenda, Mandela's official residence, was also witnessed by the Prime Minister's wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali and top Malaysian and South African businessmen.

The award was given in recognition of Dr Mahathir's exceptional and invaluable contribution to the promotion of friendly and mutually beneficial relations between South Africa and Malaysia.

It was also an indication of the respect and appreciation of the South African Government and people for Dr Mahathir.

"Prime Minister Mahathir has been a longstanding supporter of the struggle for democracy by the people of South Africa," the citation read, "and has made an important contribution to this struggle in the international arena."

When Mandela was elected president of South Africa in 1994, Dr Mahathir was the first head of government to personally congratulate Mandela.

"... since that date," the citation further read, "(Dr Mahathir) has tirelessly promoted close bonds of friendship between the peoples of South Africa and Malaysia.

With Mandela installed as president, the stage was set for the next phase of Malaysia-South Africa ties: enhancing Malaysian investments.

As a result of Dr Mahathir's call to Malaysian businessmen to be involved in the South African economy and his personal commitment and confidence in South Africa's future, Malaysia is the fourth largest investor in the country and a major trading partner in just three years.

"(The Malaysian investments) provided employment opportunities and higher living standards to many South Africans," the citation said.

In striving to emulate Malaysia's affirmative action plan for racial equality, the citation said Dr Mahathir initiated and successfully implemented a programme of promoting equal opportunities and recognition in Malaysia's multi-ethnic society while maintaining economic growth.

"This today serves as an example to South Africa "which is engaged in a similar process."

The citation also states that Dr Mahathir has been and still is a source of inspiration to the developing world through his eminent leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement, the United Nations and other international forums.

"In this context," the citation said, "he has aligned himself fully with South Africa in the promotion of South-South co-operation."

Dr Mahathir had earlier arrived at the Ysterplaat Military Air Force base for a working visit to this southernmost city of South Africa, which is now making a bid to host the 2004 Olympic Games.

After the ceremony, Dr Mahathir and his entourage were hosted to lunch by Mandela.

In the afternoon, Dr Mahathir opened the Serting House at 86, Loop Street, the headquarters for the Serting Group, Malaysia & Serting South Africa (Pty) Ltd. Present to welcome Dr Mahathir was Serting chairman and chief executive Yaacob Arshad.

With that, Dr Mahathir wrapped up his three-nation visit to southern Africa that began on May 1 with a State visit to Malawi, followed by his active participation in the inaugural South African International Dialogue in Botswana.

(END)