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Equal Malaysia-Japan partnership

Hardev Kaur in Tokyo

TOKYO, Mon: Malaysia-Japan relations are now more matured and one best described as that of "equal partnership" compared to that in 1983.

Japan today, the world's second largest economy, also views Malaysia differently as evident from the theme of Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto's visit to Malaysia earlier this year - "partnership".

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrives here for a five-day official state visit today as the leader of a "more confident and developed Malaysia". The country is more successful today and one that has set its sights on greater development and achievements as envisaged in Vision 2020 and the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC).

Malaysia is today a more advanced country, more self-confident and one that does not "go with a bowl in hand". The state of the Malaysian economy is vastly different from that in 1983 when Dr Mahathir first made an official visit to Japan.

Today Malaysia is a global player with a "high international profile" and Dr Mahathir widely respected. In a sense, many Japanese see Dr Mahathir as "a leader Japan did not have".

Malaysia has not received any concessional loans under the Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) since 1993. The country is also more selective in terms of attracting investments. Today, Malaysia wants more capital intensive, high technology investments and no longer the labour intensive industries of the 1970s and early 1980s.

With the active promotion of the MSC, the type of investments that will be actively promoted by the Malaysian authorities will be further refined to those in the multimedia sector.

Malaysian Ambassador to Tokyo Tan Sri Muhammad Khatib Abdul Hamid said with the maturing of the Malaysian economy and the "elevation of the bilateral relations between Malaysia and Japan to a higher plane", the content of the "Look East Policy" has also changed.

He explained that Malaysia now seeks to expose its students to the higher end of technical knowledge in specialised and technological subjects. It seeks to send more students for the post graduate programmes against those pursuing first and second degree courses.

During the 14 years between the two official visits, Dr Mahathir made numerous working visits to Japan. The last was in January when he addressed business leaders in the electronic and electrical industries and explained the MSC.

The visit beginning tomorrow is both ceremonial and business-like. Accompanied by several ministers and 32 business leaders, Dr Mahathir will meet Japanese business leaders (including the president of Kawasaki Steel), students (both Malaysian and Japanese) as well as foreign diplomats in Tokyo.

Ministers in the delegation include Minister of International Trade and Industry Datuk Paduka Rafidah Aziz; Minister of Transport Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik; Minister of Health Datuk Chua Jui Meng and Minister of Education Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak.

Dr Mahathir is scheduled to address a roundtable discussion - between Malaysian and Japanese businessmen. The theme of the discussions is "new businesses". Khatib said among the issues to be raised are cooperation in new areas between Malaysian and Japanese entrepreneurs as well as with third countries.

Adding that Malaysia-Japan bilateral relations have reached a new matured level, Khatib said this is evident from the admission by the Japanese about the persistent deficit in bilateral trade. In fact a joint task force powered by the respective Ministries of International Trade and Industry (Miti) has been set up to redress the imbalance.

The joint task force will identify various approaches as well as bilateral initiatives which can be undertaken by the two governments and private sectors to balance the trade.

Malaysia's trade deficit with Japan has been a cause for concern. Last year, the deficit was RM22 billion, slightly lower than the RM29.5 billion deficit in 1995. The depreciation of the yen was among the reasons for the fall.

The Japanese authorities say if exports and imports via Singapore are taken into account, the trade deficit is much smaller. Malaysian statistics only take into account direct imports and exports.

It is understood that among the areas being looked into are direct shipments to and from Malaysia instead of conducting trade through a third country. Other areas being considered are insurance, shipping, tourism promotion and increased frequencies for air services between the two countries.

In addition to being a major trading partner for Malaysia, Japan is also among the five largest foreign investors in the country. Last year, proposed Japanese investments in Malaysia totalled RM4.41 billion, a 91.2 per cent increase over the 1995 figure.

Dr Mahathir will pay a courtesy call on the Japanese Emperor at the Imperial Palace, hold discussions with his Japanese counterpart Hashimoto, and address the second Fukuoka dialogue whose theme is "multimedia". Among those expected to participate in the dialogue are Najib, Chua, Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Sanusi Junid and Multimedia Development Corp executive chairman Tan Sri Dr Othman Yeop Abdullah.

The who's who of Japan's multimedia industry are also participating in the dialogue.

During the half-day visit to Osaka, Dr Mahathir will meet 12 top business leaders from the Kansai business area. He will also visit a technical exhibition mounted by Matsushita of its latest products and visit the Umeda Sky Building. The basement of the building resembles "turn of the century Japan" retaining much of the charm of old Osaka with its family-type restaurants.

The last leg of the visit takes Dr Mahathir to NKK Tsu Works in Nagoya where Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Ali will name the LNG carrier for Asia LNG Transport.

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