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Fresh impetus for bilateral ties

Adeline Ong

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Kuwait and Bahrain will give fresh impetus to bilateral ties and develop new avenues for trade and investment and cooperation in Third World countries.

In a press briefing in Kuala Lumpur yesterday, a Wisma Putra official said Dr Mahathir will begin his five-day official visit to Kuwait and Bahrain beginning this Saturday.

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

This time around, he will be accompanied by his 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 corporate figures.

Dr Mahathir's itinerary starts with a three-day state visit to Kuwait, at the invitation of the Emir and Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

Among the highlights of Dr Mahathir's visit will be the signing of the double taxation agreement on the second day of his stay.

He will also 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.

The Prime Minister is scheduled to attend a reception with Kuwaiti and Malaysian businessmen which will be followed by a dialogue session.

He will also deliver a speech at the function.

The only other Malaysian premier to have visited Kuwait was the late Tun Abdul Razak in 1975, when Malaysia and Kuwait signed three agreements - the Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement, Cultural and Scientific Agreement and the Trade Agreement.

In 1986, the air services agreement was signed and in the following year, the investment guarantee agreement was initialled.

Under the air services agreement, Kuwait Airways was given landing rights to fly twice a week to Kuala Lumpur.

Malaysia Airlines used Kuwait as a stopover on its London flight, but terminated the service since the Gulf War.

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

Malaysian exports to the oil-rich nation in 1996 amounted to almost RM175 million while imports totalled about RM94 million. Trade between both countries has always 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 Razak had also visited Bahrain in 1975 when both countries signed the Economic and Technical, Cultural and Scientific and Cooperation Agreements.

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

In Bahrain, Dr Mahathir will call on the Emir of Bahrain, Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa and is scheduled to address the Gulf Economic Forum on

April 8.

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

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

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

Dr Mahathir will leave for Kuala Lumpur on April 9.

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