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Mahathir-Cuba

MAHATHIR ARRIVES IN HAVANA ON FIRST LEG OF FOUR-NATION TOUR

By: Syed Jamil Jaafar

HAVANA, Sept 26 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrived here Thursday for a three-day official visit as part of Malaysia's ongoing efforts to promote South-South cooperation and to explore investment and trade opportunities in new markets.

This is Dr Mahathir's first visit to this socialist country of 12 million people led by famed revolutionary leader Fidel Castro.

The Prime Minister's chartered Malaysia Airlines plane touched down at the Jose Marti international airport at 6.40 p.m. in balmy but haze-free tropical weather after an eight-hour flight from Madrid.

Dr Mahathir, whose official delegation includes Works Minister Datuk Seri S.Samy Vellu, Rural Development Minister Datuk Annuar Musa and several Menteri Besar and state ministers from Sabah and Sarawak, was received by Foreign Minister Roberto Robaina.

An official welcoming ceremony will be held at the Plaza de la Revolucion Friday to be followed by a four-eyed meeting with President Castro.

A full delegation meeting will take place after that followed by the signing of three agreements on visa abolition, trade promotion and reciprocal protection of investment.

Malaysian officials said the signing of the agreements marked a new phase in Malaysia-Cuba relations with trade and investment opportunities expected to be followed up and tapped by the private sector.

Accompanying the Prime Minister is a 70-member business delegation representing various manufacturing, shipping and service industries including big names such as MEC (Malaysia Electric Corporation), YTL Corporation, DRB-Hicom and Business Focus.

The Cuban government has undertaken several reforms in recent years following a decline in the economy as a result of the withdrawal of Soviet aid and has liberalised the agricultural markets.

Since 1995 the economy has improved, with export earnings increasing by 20 per cent to US\$1.6 billion (US\$1=RM3.05) and imports by 24 per cent to US\$2.4 billion.

Cuba has some industries manufacturing textiles and chemicals while its commodity sector produces tobacco (for the famed Havana cigars), sugar and coffee. This Caribbean island nation of 110,000 sq km also has mineral resources, particularly nickel.

Dr Mahathir's tight programme includes a visit to the Varadero tourism resort and Darsena marina projects, about 30 minutes' flight from here, on Saturday morning.

Back in Havana in the afternoon, he will attend a business luncheon with the Cuban Chamber of Commerce.

The Prime Minister leaves for Santiago, Chile, on Sunday for a three-day visit to attend the 12th Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) meeting.

He departs for Uruguay after that for a two-day visit followed by a three-day working trip to Argentina before returning home on Oct 5. --

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