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Mahathir-Regionalism

MAHATHIR CALLS FOR MORE SOUTHERN AFRICA-SOUTHEAST ASIA LINKAGES

By: E.Sivabalan

GABORONE (BOTSWANA), May 3 (Bernama) -- Malaysia today called for greater inter-regional linkages between Southern Africa and Southeast Asia to realise the full potential of South-South cooperation.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said these links would help the two regions to consolidate economic, trade and investment cooperation.

Speaking at the state banquet hosted by Botswana President Sir Ketumile Masire here today Dr Mahathir said: "This is indeed in keeping with our shared commitment towards realising the full potential of South-south cooperation."

He said Southeast Asian countries were committed to regionalism for the past 30 years.

He said the real test of a country's commitment to regionalism would be its willingness to lead by example and to open up to its neighbours and countries beyond.

"I am optimistic that Botswana with its enlightened policies and initiatives will move this process of construction and conciliation forward," said Dr Mahathir, who arrived here today for a five-day official visit.

He was accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and a business delegation led by Arab-Malaysian Group Chairman Tan Sri Azman Hashim.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia was encouraged by the role that Botswana was playing in the growing integration of the Southern African region through its participation in the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

"The peace and stability and the mutual confidence that exist in the region augurs well for the economic well-being of the people in this region," he said.

Meanwhile, when speaking at the Botswana-Malaysia Business meeting here later, Dr Mahathir said the time has come for Malaysia and Botswana to explore and expand bilateral cooperation into substantive economic collaborations.

He said the collaboration should be one that could yield positive benefits for the two countries.

"Developing countries like Botswana and Malaysia should take the opportunity to forge mutually beneficial trade and business alliances and accept new non-traditional partners consistent with the realities of the current global economic environments," he said.

Dr Mahathir said history no longer stood in the way of the two nations making new friends and learning from the experience of others in different parts of the world.

"It is in the light of this that Malaysia seeks new friends in Africa," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the present level of trade between Malaysia and Botswana is very low compared with the two countries' total global trade.

He said bilateral trade has been growing steadily, albeit slowly, from a mere US\$17,500 (RM43,750) in 1992 to US\$541,000 (RM1.35 million) last year.

Dr Mahathir said if it was not possible for Malaysia to import more from Botswana, Kuala Lumpur could help Botswana to export more to other

countries.

"In the end, it is the total balance of payments which counts. It is impossible to balance trade with every country," he said.

Dr Mahathir pointed out that distance and little knowledge about each country's potential and resources have contributed towards the small size of trade with each other.

"Hence, we find that a narrow range of products are currently being traded with little information on market opportunities," he said.

Dr Mahathir hoped that with his visit here and today's meeting, the two countries would be able to improve on the current situation.

He believed that the Malaysian and Botswanan private sectors could complement each other in banking, tourism and agro-related industries.

Dr Mahathir said he believed that increased interaction between the two countries through visits and meetings would further strengthen economic relations and boost bilateral ties.

He said Malaysia hoped that its ties with Botswana would go beyond the area of business and cater to the nation-building needs of Botswana as well.

"We are prepared to work together in other areas to assist the (Botswana) government in realising its socio-economic objectives where we may be competent," he said.

The Malaysian leader said likewise Malaysian businessmen in Botswana could explore mutually-beneficial ventures that would bring more meaningful benefits to the people of both nations.

Dr Mahathir also told the participants that the Malaysian private sector has been very supportive of the Malaysian government's concerted drive to enhance trade, economic and commercial links with other newly-emerging economies.

He also called on Malaysian investors to form joint ventures with their Botswanan counterparts to tap minerals in Botswana which he said have the potential to contribute to its economic growth. -- BERNAMA

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