

24 SEP 1997

Mahathir-Departure

MAHATHIR LEAVES FOR OFFICIAL VISIT TO LATIN AMERICA

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 24 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad left for Cuba today on a trail-blazing mission to establish Malaysia's first high-level contact with revolutionary leader Fidel Castro and explore opportunities for trade and investment.

Dr Mahathir will have a four-eyed meeting with President Castro after the ceremonial welcome at the Revolution Plaza in Havana on Friday to be followed by a full delegation meeting.

Three agreements -- one on visa abolition, the second on promotion and reciprocal protection of investment and the third on trade -- will be signed to mark the beginning of a new phase in Malaysia-Cuba relations, officials said.

This is Dr Mahathir's first visit to Cuba, the only communist state in the Caribbean/Latin American region.

Cuba has a population of about 11 million and is famous for its cigars which are said to be the best in the world. The country grows sugar cane and coffee and has some industries making textiles, chemicals and wood and paper products. It is also rich in cobalt and nickel.

Dr Mahathir, who will spend two days in Cuba, is accompanied by an official delegation comprising among others Works Minister Datuk Seri S.Samy Vellu, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh, Terengganu Menteri Besar Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad, Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman and Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim.

Also accompanying the Prime Minister is a 70-member business delegation led by Malaysia Airlines chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli.

During a technical stop-over in Madrid en route to Havana, Dr Mahathir will call on his Spanish counterpart, Jose Maria Aznar.

After Cuba, Dr Mahathir will visit Chile where he will attend the 12th Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) in Santiago.

From Santiago, Dr Mahathir will go to Montevideo, Uruguay, for a two-day official trip (Oct 1-2) after which he will round up his tour with a three-day visit to Argentina.

He is expected to be back in Kuala Lumpur on Oct 6.

Officials said the Prime Minister's Latin American tour is part of ongoing efforts to tap new markets and enhance South-South cooperation. --

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