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Malaysia, Bahrain agree to set up commission

Kamarul Yunus in Manama (Bahrain)

MANAMA (BAHRAIN), Wed: Malaysia and Bahrain have agreed to set up a government-level commission to facilitate and improve bilateral relations.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said under the proposed plan, economic ministers of both countries will lead the commission.

"There is a need for government leaders of both countries to have contact. In order to facilitate this, we have decided to set up a commission so that we can discuss and bring up ideas on promoting and improving relations," he told journalists from Malaysia, Bahrain and several international news agencies on the second and final day of his official visit here yesterday.

Citing the importance of setting up such a commission, Dr Mahathir said this is one of the ways the responsible governments of both countries can meet regularly and come up with various ideas and suggestions.

"Government leaders of both countries should meet regularly. Then they can start improving trade, or getting into ways to trade and make other needed adjustments as well as identify areas of cooperation," he added.

Responding to another question, Dr Mahathir said the Government has no immediate plan to open an embassy here but Malaysia may consider appointing an honorary consul in Bahrain.

"Currently, we have an ambassador, who is accredited to Bahrain, from Kuwait. We can't afford too many embassies. Eventually, perhaps we could have an embassy here when there is need," he said, adding it is expensive to set up and operate embassies.

Asked whether Malaysia would appoint a trade commissioner in Bahrain, Dr Mahathir said the Government will study this.

Asked about his meeting with Bahrain's Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa Sulman Al-Khalifa on Monday, Dr Mahathir said it was a friendly and cordial meeting and both leaders acknowledged the importance of exchanging information between their countries and also the two different regions.

"Malaysia and Bahrain agree that both countries or the two regions - the Gulf and South-East Asia - should know each other better and help develop their economies.

"Therefore, they should discuss ways and means of developing relations, particularly economic relations such as investment, financing and trade," he said, adding that both governments have identified certain areas of cooperation.

For example, Dr Mahathir said there is a need to have better communications between Malaysia and Bahrain, which means also having more flights between the two nations.

"Currently, only Gulf Air flies to Kuala Lumpur, while Malaysia Airlines has yet to fly to Bahrain," he said.

He said Malaysia Airlines' chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli, who accompanied the Prime Minister on his visit, has expressed the intention of having some forms of working relations such as a code-share agreement with Gulf Air.

On regional cooperation, Dr Mahathir said Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) is willing to work with any regional bloc or association such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

"Asean has been working a lot with other groupings as well as individual countries. We have what we call dialogue partners ... we have dialogue sessions with Japan, South Korea, India, the European Union, the US,

Australia and New Zealand.

"We constantly keep in touch with them in order to, for example, adjust to their needs and for them to be more flexible perhaps in dealing with Asean countries.

"We can propose some sort of cooperation with South countries like South African nations and also Indian Ocean countries. I do not see why we cannot cooperate with the GCC, since the countries in the grouping are becoming much more important now.

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