

27/09/1997

Malaysia, Cuba sign agreements marking new phase in relations

A. Kadir Jasin in Havana

MALAYSIA and Cuba Thursday signed three landmark agreements marking a new phase in the relations between the two countries.

The three agreements are on visa abolition, trade and promotion and reciprocal protection of investment.

The agreements were signed after consultations between Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Cuban President Fidel Castro at the Revolution Palace.

The signing ceremony was also witnessed by members of the delegations of the two leaders.

Dr Mahathir arrived in the Cuban capital on Thursday evening to start a four-day official visit - the first by a Malaysian head of government to this Caribbean nation.

Dr Mahathir and his delegation touched down at Havana's Jose Marti International Airport at 6.30pm local time (6.30am Friday, Malaysian time) in a chartered MAS Boeing 747-400 aircraft.

He was met on arrival by Cuban Foreign Minister, Roberto Robaina Gonzales, and the Malaysian Ambassador to Cuba, Tan Sri Razali Ismail. Razali, who is based in New York, is also Malaysia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

During the stop-over in Madrid, Dr Mahathir met the Spanish Prime Minister, Jose Maria Aznar.

The visit to Cuba is the culmination of hectic high-level exchanges between Kuala Lumpur and Havana since 1994.

It started with the visit to Malaysia by Gonzales in March 1994 during which the Malaysian Foreign Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, disclosed that Malaysia had proposed the establishment of technical and economic co-operation with Cuba.

The Cuban Minister had said during the visit that his country hoped to forge stronger economic ties and more pro-active diplomatic relations with Malaysia. Gonzales also announced Cuba's entry as a member of the Kuala Lumpur-based South Investment, Trade and Technology Data Exchange Centre.

In April last year, Gonzales again visited Malaysia and this time extended the invitation of the Cuban President for Dr Mahathir to visit his country.

This was followed in June with the visit to Cuba by a business delegation headed by Economic Adviser to the Malaysian Government, Tun Daim Zainuddin.

During the visit, Daim urged Malaysian businessmen to position themselves in Cuba which, he believed, offered vast investment opportunities and could give them a strong foothold in the Caribbean region.

At the same time, the Cuban Foreign Trade Minister, Pedro Alvarez Borrego, visited Malaysia and said Malaysian investors should join others in disregarding the US pressure on Cuba, and to start exploring the economic potential of the island.

He said in spite of US pressure, the foreign capital inflow into Cuba continued to grow, particularly from Canadian and the European Union sources.

In February this year, a high-powered Barisan Nasional mission led by then secretary-general Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, who is Information Minister, visited Cuba.

Mohamed said after the visit that the stage was set for other leaders to enhance the efforts taken by the ruling party.

The visit, which received wide coverage in the Cuban Press, included meetings with key members of Castro's Cabinet.

The highlight was a 90-minute meeting with the 71-year-old leader at the Cuban Communist Party headquarters.

According to Mohamed, Castro was impressed with Malaysia's progress and with Dr Mahathir's international standing.

Among the functions, Dr Mahathir laid a wreath at the monument of Jose Marti, the Cuban independence hero who died fighting the Spaniards on May 19, 1895.

From there he proceeded to the Revolution Palace for an official welcoming ceremony and private meeting with Castro.

A delegation meeting was also held soon after the consultation between the two leaders.

The Prime Minister also visited Cuba's Biotechnology Centre and the HIV/AIDS Institute.

This was followed by a dinner in his honour hosted by Castro.

Today, Dr Mahathir will fly to Varadero, half an hour to the east of Havana, to visit two tourism-related developments - the Varadero Tourism Resort and Darsena Marina Project.

In the afternoon, he will attend a lunch given by the Cuban Chamber of Commerce at Melia Cohiba Hotel in Havana where he is staying during the visit.

Dr Mahathir departs for Santiago, Chile, tomorrow morning for an official visit.

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