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Malaysia to help Mongolia become 'less remote'

Fauziah Ismail in Ulaanbaatar

ULAANBAATAR, Thurs: Malaysia is prepared to work with the Mongolian Government to overcome the obstacles that have resulted in Mongolia being perceived as a remote country.

According to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, what Mongolia needs is to invest in some facilities to become "less remote".

The Malaysian private sector would be interested to participate in such infrastructure development if it is privatized, he said at a press conference at the end of his four-day official visit to Mongolia.

He was asked if there were other efforts which could be undertaken to bring Mongolia "nearer" to countries in South-East Asia.

Earlier, when accepting the honorary Doctorate of Humanity from the National University of Mongolia, Dr Mahathir had said that the time has come for people in South-East Asia to revise their perception of Mongolia being "remote".

"It took only seven hours to fly here (from Malaysia). It takes 13 hours to fly non-stop (from Kuala Lumpur) to London and more than 20 hours to New York. Yet these places are not regarded as being remote.

"It seems to me that Mongolia with its pristine beauty, its clear air, its glorious history and the relics of the past, would be a great place for tourists from South-East Asia and other parts of the world," he said.

At the 30-minute press conference, he however noted that there are some constraints in Mongolia with regards to infrastructure and transportation which may pose as a barrier to foreign direct investments.

"For the time being, we have to make do with whatever is available and we will have to find ways and means of overcoming weaknesses in the infrastructure," he said.

Malaysia has ready taken the first step to improve access to Mongolia by signing an air services agreement on Tuesday.

The agreement enables the national carriers of the two countries to carry 1,800 passengers a week between points in the respective countries, with three intermediate points and one point beyond each. The pact is expected to boost not only passenger but also cargo traffic.

"I expect relations to be stepped up (following the visit)," he said.

Dr Mahathir described his visit as useful as it helped establish good contacts between the two governments as well as "put some flesh" into the relationship by improving the prospects of bilateral trade and investment.

During the four-day visit, Dr Mahathir is accompanied by a 66-member strong business delegation led by Malaysian Mining Corp (MMC) chief executive Tan Sri Ibrahim Menudin.

"The opportunities here are quite good. You have attractive products for exports such as cashmere, air dried beef, coal and other minerals," he added.

Dr Mahathir was also asked about the hiring of foreign workers in Malaysia and whether the Government would consider allowing Mongolians to work in the country.

The Prime Minister said the Government is moving towards reducing the number of foreign workers in the country while the industries are shifting from labour-intensive to high technology, value-added operations.

"But if you have highly qualified Mongolians, we welcome them," he said.

While Malaysia does not have the capacity to assist Mongolia financially, it is prepared to help train Mongolians, for example, in

various aspects of administration, through the technical cooperation programme, Dr Mahathir added.

The Prime Minister also noted that there is a great deal of interest among the Malaysian businessmen on the proposed establishment of a Mongolia-Malaysia township in Ulaanbaatar.

"It was not discussed during my meetings with the Mongolian authorities but it was raised at the meeting I had with the Malaysian businessmen. I have seen the (proposed development) site... There is a great deal of interest among the businessmen."

On the MMC's proposed involvement in the rehabilitation of the Egiin Gol Power Station, Dr Mahathir said negotiations with the relevant authorities are on-going. "Some kind of arrangement can be arrived at."

In a lighter vein, Dr Mahathir was asked how many honorary degrees he had received so far following the latest conferment by the National University of Mongolia. "Not many... less than 10... but none from Malaysian universities, only foreign ones," he said.

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