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PM's visits open new chapter in ties with Kuwait, Bahrain

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WHILE the Malaysian media has always given prominence to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visits, functions as well as speeches, to have the same accorded Dr Mahathir by the foreign media, is unusual.

However, the Prime Minister received this rare attention during his five-day official visit to two Gulf countries - Kuwait and Bahrain - last week.

His keynote address, for example, which was delivered at the Fifth Gulf Economic Forum annual conference in Bahrain on April 8, was featured prominently by Bahrain's television network as well as its English daily and tabloid.

The Bahrain Television or Bahrain TV, aired the Prime Minister's speech in full during its news highlights, as well as the opening speech of Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa Sulman Al-Khalifa and another speaker at the conference, Dr Esmat Abdel Meguid, the secretary-general of the Arab League.

Dr Mahathir's speech was also published in full by the Bahrain Tribune and was featured on the front page of the newspaper. In fact, the arrival of Dr Mahathir in Bahrain on April 7 was given more than 20 minutes coverage during Bahrain TV's news bulletin.

During his three-day official visit in Kuwait, beginning April 5, the Prime Minister was given similar prominence by the Kuwaiti television network as well as newspapers such as the Kuwait Times and the Arab Times.

The extensive media coverage in Bahrain and Kuwait probably reflects the enthusiasm of both countries in forging stronger ties with Malaysia. They described Malaysia as a Muslim brother that had made tremendous economic progress and is politically stable.

It was thus not surprising that Dr Mahathir remarked on the need for the Gulf countries to look to the East and the South rather than merely focus on the West and the North.

In his speech at the Gulf Economic Forum, Dr Mahathir said, "I have only two points to make before you today. First, you are in West Asia. You are not the Middle East, to the east of Europe, the middle of the East. You can locate yourself in the middle of the world if you so wish.

"West Asia, on the other hand, is part of Asia. By all means look North. Look West. Do not neglect the South. But whatever you do, do not forget to go East - as you did in history, to the benefit of us in the East, to the benefit of the Europeans to your North, and to your own benefit.

"You are the first Western people to reach the Malay Peninsula, now a part of Malaysia. To us, you were and you are, Westerners, not just Europeans."

Dr Mahathir's speech seems to have created an impact on the people in the Gulf region, especially Bahrain and made them realise the importance and potential in working closely with East Asian countries, particularly Malaysia.

A clear indication of this was the numerous questions forwarded by Bahraini businessmen, including bankers, during their meeting with the Prime Minister.

While praising Dr Mahathir for his remarkable speech, Bahraini businessmen and bankers also sought more information on how they could increase business collaboration with their Malaysian counterparts and urged Malaysia to use Bahrain as a gateway to export goods to the Gulf

countries.

Journalists from Bahrain and international wire services also joined in the accolade for Dr Mahathir. In a manner of speaking, the Prime Minister's speech opened up the minds of the people in the Gulf region to closer cooperation with East Asian countries, which currently seems lacking.

Despite not being manufacturing-based countries, Kuwait and Bahrain are potentially strong in the areas of Islamic banking and finance as well as the petroleum sector, and this could be useful in enhancing closer Malaysia-Gulf cooperation.

Dr Mahathir also urged Malaysian businessmen to tap the vast business potential offered by Bahrain and Kuwait although the manufacturing sector's potential was not too visible.

Kuwait, he said, does not manufacture goods but imports food from elsewhere. Malaysian businessmen who venture into the food and manufacturing sectors may find them viable but they will have to carefully study the demand for Malaysian products due to the limited markets in Kuwait and Bahrain.

For example, if Malaysians want to set up a palm oil refinery and process products in either Kuwait or Bahrain, they will have to ascertain whether there is a large enough market for them.

It would be advisable for Malaysian firms, Dr Mahathir said, to set up plants to cater to the Gulf region.

Kuwait and Bahrain can still serve as platforms for the distribution of Malaysian goods to the Gulf region. Bahrain and Kuwait on the other hand, could use Malaysia as the gateway to the South-East Asian market.

The proposed air links, including the revival of air services between Kuala Lumpur and Kuwait City as well as that between Kuala Lumpur and Manama will further enhance trade links between Malaysia and the two Gulf nations.

Then again, Malaysia has to examine further whether it would be indeed viable to mount direct flights to Kuwait City and Manama or use these two cities as stop-overs and pick up passengers and then fly on to other destinations.

Overall, Dr Mahathir's visits to Kuwait and Bahrain have opened a new chapter in enhancing cooperation between Malaysia and the Gulf states.

The awards, the Mubarak Al-Kabir and Ahmed Al Fateh Medal, conferred by Kuwait and Bahrain respectively, are symbols of the respect both nations have for the Prime Minister as well as their recognition of Malaysia's economic achievements.

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