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PM heads for Pakistan after talks in Gulf State

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad left for Pakistan yesterday morning, leaving behind a foundation which would hopefully pave the way for better trade relations between Malaysia and Bahrain.

The Prime Minister ended his three-day official visit here with a call to businessmen from both sides to find concrete means for improving mutual trade.

On Tuesday, Dr Mahathir held two rounds of economic talks - one with businessmen and another with bankers.

Both meetings turned out to be lively, reflecting the keen desire among the Bahraini business community to work with their Malaysian counterparts.

At the meeting with businessmen, Dr Mahathir was asked why the cost of certain goods from Malaysia were high and whether the Government was aware of this.

One importer of Malaysian plywood said his company has been buying plywood from Singapore but may have to look for alternative sources if the prices become too prohibitive.

Dr Mahathir said purchases of Malaysian products through third countries tend to cost more and suggested that one way of overcoming this is by buying direct.

"We have an excellent port in Port Klang which can now cater for big containers," he said. "I suggest you go through Port Klang and you'll be surprised at the savings you can make. You go through third parties and you'll have to pay double in handling charges."

Dr Mahathir was accompanied to the talks by a group of Malaysian businessmen led by Malaysia Airlines chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli. The meeting also saw exchange of ideas on the mechanics of improving trade volume between both countries.

One Bahraini businessmen said Malaysian businessmen should conduct a comprehensive study of his country's import needs.

"Bahrain," the businessman said, "has a large import bill and we would like this to be reduced. I suggest that a thorough study be done on Bahrain's edible oil requirements because there is much potential in this."

Dr Mahathir responded: "Tell us what you want and we'll get them for you."

When another businessmen asked whether Malaysia could provide technical know-how in some of their ventures because technology was very difficult to acquire, Dr Mahathir said this was possible through joint ventures with Malaysian partners.

Malaysian-made goods, he said, are found worldwide while efforts have been made to have Malaysian-branded items manufactured and exported widely.

In his meeting with bankers, Dr Mahathir's speech at the Gulf Economic Forum was described as "inspirational."

In fact, one banker said Dr Mahathir was the leader who will "take us into the next century with confidence and vision."

The same banker asked for the Prime Minister's views on trade groups and whether this would help enhance regional and international co-operation.

Dr Mahathir said trade groups should not block opportunities and free trade, which was why he was against the idea of blocs such as the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Trade groups, he said, should be a forum where opportunities are exchanged and trade could be discussed openly in a global effort.

"This falls in line," he said, "with what I often refer to as the enrich thy neighbour policy which Malaysia is propagating."

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