

23 JUN 1997
Mahathir-Visit
PM VISITS HUNGARY

By: Wan A. Hulaimi

BUDAPEST, June 23 (Bernama) -- Although the arrival of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad here this morning marked only his second visit here since his official tour in 1987, it will help augment a relationship that has already been strengthened by an unusually high flurry of official activities between the two capitals this year.

This is a city which, by all visible signs, can still lay a claim to its erstwhile title of "Queen of the Danube", even after years of economic stagnation under Communist rule.

While economic stagnation under socialist central planning held back material progress for many years, Hungary strove ahead with the strength of its education system and the intellectual prowess of its citizens which gave birth to some eight Nobel prize winners, a number disproportionate to its relatively low population of just over 10 million.

To harness this reservoir of native talent and translate it into technological and economic strength, Hungary has been forging close links with countries on the forefront of the global line-up, especially the newly emerging ones such as Malaysia from whom it can both learn from its successful experiments and forge ahead in strategic alliances.

In April this year, Hungarian Prime Minister Gyula Horn was in Malaysia on an official visit, following an earlier visit there in 1995 of its president Artad Gonez.

This visit by Dr Mahathir in turn was preceded by an official visit by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar in May.

This visit by Dr Mahathir is a working one as testified by the full programme of visits, discussions and signing ceremonies already on the agenda.

The Malaysian party which preceded Dr Mahathir's arrival with Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah this morning from London is 70 strong of which 25 are business people, with the rest drawn from Ministries and other government institutions.

That Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik and Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding and Deputy Foreign Minister Datuk Leo Michael Toyad are at hand gives the flavour of the mission here.

The business community is led by Berjaya Group's Datuk Vincent Tan.

Already last Saturday, before the working visit was set in full motion with the arrival of Dr Mahathir, Law had signed a memorandum of confirmation of minutes of meetings with their Hungarian counterparts.

The contents of the minute included, among other things, an understanding to set up academic links with educational institutions of higher learning in Malaysia.

Soon after his arrival, Dr Mahathir witnessed the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Malaysia Multimedia Development Corporation's (MDC) executive chairman Tan Sri Datuk Dr Othman Yeop Abdullah and Hungary's Inforpark RT Board Director Imre Grof at Parliament House.

This MoU will carry further cooperation and two-way exchange between Malaysia and Hungary in the rapidly expanding field of information technology (IT).

On the agenda are discussions on tourism and privatisation and investment opportunities.

Hungary's record in tourism is impressive for its hosting of 45 million tourists here annually, more than four and a half times the number of its own population.

A close scrutiny of this figure, impressive though it may be, shows that far from giving them cause for satisfaction, Hungary is keen to gain Malaysia's help in improving the quality of its tourists so that like Malaysia, they will get a better cross-section of the tourist market.

A Malaysian official explained: "They want our people to come and help in tourism related industries."

After years of state control, the Hungarians also would like to learn from the Malaysia's experience in privatisation.

The Malaysian official said further: "In Kuala Lumpur this year, the Prime Minister of Hungary indicated that they have problems with unemployment. They have a very strong information technology and gave some indications that they were interested in working with Malaysia in providing skilled manpower.

During the last two months, Malaysian officials have also been carrying out discussions with their Hungarian counterparts to promote stronger academic links between the two countries.

"There is scope for our post graduate students to come here to study in very specialised areas of applied science," the Malaysian official said.

In finance there has already been an established link between Malaysia and Hungary in the shape of the Malaysian owned International commercial bank (I.C.Bank) which opened here a few years ago and whose official opening will be attended by Dr Mahathir today.

Among his activities here tomorrow, Dr Mahathir will also address and hold a dialogue with a Hungarian business delegation on the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in the Congress Hall of Parliament Building.

Dr Mahathir will also visit the Ikarus Vehicle Manufacturing Holdings in the afternoon prior to his departure from here tomorrow afternoon. --
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