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Pushing for closer ties

THE Prime Minister is back in Africa, yet again. In the last six months, he has been to Ghana, Guinea and twice to Zimbabwe. This week alone, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will have covered Malawi, Botswana and South Africa. His Cabinet ministers have also been including Africa in their official trips abroad, although not as regularly. Last month, Economic Adviser to the Government Tun Daim Zainuddin completed a whirlwind tour of six African countries. This weekend, Dr Mahathir joins 13 heads of state and government in the inaugural Southern African International Dialogue.

So what's the attraction there. Africa - the former Dark Continent, where wars and famine have raged for years, where apartheid once not too long ago set back the human race by two centuries or more, where poverty and starvation are no longer headlines but mere snippets? What is in Africa for Malaysia and its people? Daim said in an interview with the New Straits Times that his tour to the African countries was to further strengthen South-South cooperation, a concept that Malaysia and the Group of Fifteen countries have embraced since the end of the last decade. The idea of this cooperation is for the more developed developing countries to help the others progress, not by aid but by trade and investment. The South-South idea has been brushed aside by many as rhetorics. But trade statistics will show that not all that sounds rhetorical are necessarily rhetorics. According to the Malaysia External Trade Development Corp, trade between Malaysia and the 13 countries that will be represented at the Southern African International Dialogue grew by more than 400 per cent between 1990 and 1996, from RM422.5 million to RM1.884 billion. Individually, the progress can be breathtaking. With South Africa, for example, trade grew by an incredible 1.42 million times over a six-year period, from RM95,545 in 1990 to RM1.36 billion last year. In terms of investments, Malaysian investors are not doing too badly, either. They have projects in Zimbabwe, in power-generation field and housing construction; they are laying a telecoms network in Malawi, Mauritius and Namibia; they have just concluded one of the largest privatization deals with the purchase of Telkom South Africa; and Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional is planning to assemble or manufacture the national cars in southern Africa soon.

However, trade with Africa is still small compared with Malaysia's other more traditional trading partners. During the first two months of this year, for example, its major partners for trade were Japan, Singapore, the US, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, Hong Kong, Germany, the UK and the Netherlands, all of which accounted for 78 per cent of Malaysia's total trade during the two months. Malaysia's imports from Japan during the first two months, for example, exceeded by more than three times the total trade with the 13 African countries for the entire 1996. This is why Malaysia is pushing harder for African countries to open up and accept it as their potential economic partner, their gateway not only to Asean but also the dynamic East Asia region. Malaysia is not merely wanting to sell its goods, but it has proved to have the capacity to buy from its trading partners in Africa. Malaysian companies invest in those countries not just to reap profits but also to provide employment to the locals and the chance for the local businesses to participate in areas that they may not yet have an expertise. Certainly, the efforts by the Malaysian Government have not been in vain, thus far. Many African countries have also come out

to Malaysia in recent years to see for themselves what their most regular visitors are really all about. None of them have gone home dissappointed, we hope. The Southern African International Dialogue that takes place this week in Botswana - the idea of the dialogue was born in Langkawi last year during the Langkawi International Dialogue - is yet another testimony to the close ties between the continent and Malaysia. At the rate Dr Mahathir is helping push these two worlds closer together, prospects for the long-distance neighbours had never been brighter.

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