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Rolling out the red carpet again

JUST two days after Croatian Prime Minister Zlatko Matesa completed his two-day official visit to Malaysia, the country is again rolling out the red carpet, this time to welcome South African President Nelson Mandela who arrives today for a five-day visit. Mandela's visit to Malaysia is his first since being elected the Republic's head of state in 1994. Prior to this, he had visited the country twice in 1993. Today's visit reflects the President's keenness on strengthening the long-standing, friendly and warm relations between the two countries as well as boosting bilateral trade ties. Mandela had planned to visit Malaysia last October but a knee surgery had forced him to put off his four-nation South-East Asian tour.

Issues and measures to be taken to improve trade, which totalled RM883 million in 1995, as well as those related to political and social relations are expected to be discussed by Mandela and his host Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Meetings and briefings have been scheduled for the 90-member delegation accompanying the President, and a number of agreements are expected to be signed.

Malaysia established diplomatic relations with South Africa in November 1993 after the dismantling of the apartheid regime and has remained firmly supportive of Mandela's Government. On the personal front, it is well known that Dr Mahathir and the South African leader have forged cordial and close ties. Following Dr Mahathir's visit to South Africa in 1995, several South African companies have been invited to tap business opportunities in Malaysia and some of them have successfully established ventures with local companies. Runert Technology Systems or Reutech, for example, was awarded a contract to instal a RM25 million mobile air traffic control radar system as a back-up for the existing Thomson radar used at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport in Subang. Malaysian investors have meanwhile made significant inroads in South Africa, with the likes of Renong Bhd, YTL, Landmarks Bhd and Malaysian Resources Corporation Bhd having established a presence in the country's housing and tourism industries, among others.

There has been a surge in the number of visits to Malaysia by foreign heads of states in recent years, and so too by trade and business missions from all over the world. In the past week alone, Malaysia played host to two heads of state, Matesa and Thai Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. This heightened foreign interest in the country appears to coincide with the rapid economic development over the past nine years. The visitors' objectives are largely the same: to improve bilateral relations and perhaps give the respective private sectors a nudge towards working together through joint ventures and business collaborations in each other's countries or in third markets.

A number of foreign nations also look to Malaysia for pointers on how to manage their economies. Croatia, for example, is impressed with Malaysia's record of developing small- and medium-sized businesses and industries, and has asked Kuala Lumpur for assistance in giving this sector back home a much-needed boost. This is in line with the tripartite arrangement, involving Malaysia, Bosnia Herzegovina and Croatia, to reconstruct war-ravaged Balkan country.

Thailand on the other hand, being a close neighbour, wants to see further expansion of cooperative efforts, including in resolving issues related to demarcation of the two countries' borders. Chavalit, who became

Thailand's Prime Minister only last November, expressed willingness not only to work for an amicable solution to the border issue but also pledged to help Malaysia stem the entry of illegal immigrants into the country. On both counts, Malaysia appreciates the spirit of friendship and good neighbourliness shown by Chavalit. However, Malaysia is certainly not confining its efforts to establish cordial relations with other nations to only its neighbours. By nature and by design, it is happy to make friends with anybody who is genuinely interested in forging a mutually beneficial relationship.

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