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Dr M's Myanmar visit gets wide media coverage

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YANGON: To say the Myanmar Government placed great importance on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's two-day official visit to the Golden Land is an understatement.

The state-owned television news covered every item in Dr Mahathir's itinerary, from his arrival at Yangon International Airport in the morning to a short visit to the National Museum in the afternoon, up to a cultural show at night.

The state-owned English daily, "The New Light of Myanmar" gave equally wide coverage to Dr Mahathir's first visit since Myanmar joined the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) last year.

Under the headline "Two leaders, two nations rededicate themselves to work together", reports of Dr Mahathir's arrival and his meetings with Myanmar leaders filled the front and back pages of the daily, and continued to fill most of the editorial pages.

Photographs of the Prime Minister at various functions during the day filled the second and third pages.

Its editorial said: "The people of Myanmar take Dr Mahathir to be their strong ally due to his effort to get Myanmar into Asean, in the face of obstruction by a Western group who interfered in regional affairs and tried to apply their bully-boy tactics, and made reason prevail."

The editorial added that the visit of Dr Mahathir goes down in history of both bilateral and regional relations as a milestone because it helps emphasise the place one reserves for the other.

The paper called Dr Mahathir "a staunch defender" of Asian values who has been "vocal on matters in which others with sinister designs often dabble".

"Many a time, he has been known to be deservedly vitriolic in dealing a straight hook to those who interfere in the internal affairs of countries in this region on the pretext of human rights and democracy," it added.

When asked during a press conference at the end of this visit whether he agreed with the editorial, Dr Mahathir said: "Not in same words perhaps, but countries should be free to make decisions on their own, free from any outside pressure."

The Prime Minister said the purpose of his visit is to know what is happening in Myanmar and to learn more about how best to help the country fully participate as an Asean member, including in the region's economic development.

As Dr Mahathir pointed out during a luncheon with the Malaysian Association (Myanmar), the country has changed a lot in the last 10 years. "The ports have been modernised, industrial estates have taken off, and the roads are wide and clean," said the Prime Minister, who last visited Myanmar in 1988.

A Malaysian businessman also commented that Yangon, the capital, is like Kuala Lumpur 30 years ago. "That's why we come in now. We look for the long-term returns," he said.

Malaysian companies already in Myanmar include Petronas, Bolton, Malayan Banking Bhd, Micasa Hotel, Public Bank, UMW Corp, Genting Sanyen, Mamee Double-Decker, Malaysia Airlines and Bank of Commerce.

According to an official from Myanmar's Inland Revenue Department, there are about 50 Malaysian companies operating here in all sectors of the economy. They began arriving three to four years ago.

The corporate tax in Myanmar is 30 per cent, with tax holidays and allowances provided for certain industries and business activities.

When asked what was the most important subject in his discussions with Myanmar leaders, Dr Mahathir replied: "Economic cooperation was the most important subject: how to reduce the impact of currency and enhance economic growth."

If that is the case, then the Prime Minister's visit was certainly fruitful. Myanmar agreed to use its currency, the kyat, in trade with other Asean countries. Imports would also be tallied with exports and only the balance paid.

This not only seeks to reduce dependence on foreign currency, but will also help address the present trade imbalance between Myanmar and Malaysia. Trade between the two countries, totalling more than RM1 billion, is currently in Malaysia's favour.

On another level, Dr Mahathir's visit is also a success of the Asean spirit and solidarity. Being the newest member of the association, Myanmar needs some special attention and guidance, particularly in these early stages.

Close contact at various levels, effective exchange of information and cooperation should help Myanmar catch up with the other Asean members, and together hope to achieve greater progress in the future.

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