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Mahathir-Myanmar

MAHATHIR'S YANGON VISIT A BOOST TO ASEAN SOLIDARITY

KUALA LUMPUR, March 5 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will make a two-day official visit to Myanmar from Monday as part of his ongoing efforts to enhance bilateral ties with neighbouring countries and help strengthen Asean solidarity.

He will hold talks with the chairman of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) Senior General Than Shwe shortly after arrival in Yangon in the afternoon.

They are expected to exchange views on the latest developments pertaining to the financial and economic situation in the region, a Wisma Putra statement today said.

The two leaders will also identify new areas of cooperation to further enhance bilateral relations.

An avoidance of double taxation agreement is also expected to be signed during the visit, the statement said.

According to the programme, the Prime Minister will plant a tree at the People's Park to mark his visit.

In the morning the following day, the Prime Minister will tour the new Thilawa port, 18 km from Yangon, followed by a business luncheon meeting to be attended by both Malaysian and Myanmar businessmen.

Dr Mahathir leaves for home later in the afternoon.

Wisma Putra officials said Dr Mahathir's visit to Yangon is significant to Malaysia in terms of both bilateral ties and Asean cooperation.

This will be Dr Mahathir's first visit to Myanmar since its admission into Asean, despite strong opposition from the West, at the 30th Asean Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur in July last year.

Dr Mahathir has been a strong advocate of the "prosper thy neighbour" policy and in the case of the erstwhile isolationist Myanmar, he believes the best way to interact with that country is through "constructive engagement" instead of the hard-line approach favoured by Western powers.

In an interview with Bernama in conjunction with Asean's 30th anniversary last year, Dr Mahathir defended the constructive engagement policy, saying that it had brought tremendous results as Myanmar had now changed a lot and was willing to be a member of a community where before it alienated itself.

Malaysia's trade with Myanmar stood at RM1.1 billion last year, with exports worth RM974.6 million and imports amounting to RM140.3 million.

Malaysia sells palm oil, crude petroleum and petroleum products to Myanmar while it imports mainly agricultural produce from that country.

There are also substantial Malaysian investments in Myanmar with at least 16 projects ongoing.

Myanmar, covering 671,000 sq km, is the largest country in the Southeast Asian mainland in terms of land size. It has a population of about 47 million with the Burmans making up 65 per cent, Shan 10 per cent, Karen 7 per cent and other ethnic minorities the rest.

Eighty-seven per cent of Myanmar's population are Buddhists, 5 per cent Christian and 4 per cent Muslim.

With a per capita income of US\$700, Myanmar is regarded by United Nations agencies as one of the poorest countries in the world. There are about 10,000 Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia.

-- Bernama

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