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Malaysia to invest more in Myanmar once economy picks up

Zainon Ahmad in Yangon; Badrul Hisham Mahzan
PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad assured Myanmar that Malaysia will increase its investments in the country once the economy of the region has picked up again.

He said though Malaysia's capability to invest abroad had been reduced due to the currency problem, it did not mean the end of trade with countries in the region.

Malaysia would continue to trade but would use local currencies instead of the US dollar or enter into counter-trading, he told a Press conference before leaving Myanmar at the end of a two-day official visit.

"But when we recover from the present problems, we want to invest more in Myanmar," he said in response to a question from a Myanmar journalist.

To a question by a Malaysian journalist, the Prime Minister said trade between Myanmar and Malaysia was very much in Malaysia's favour and it was necessary to try to balance this up.

"Malaysia must look around to see what we can buy and buy more of them so that Myanmar will be in a position to buy our products," he said.

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.

He said among the Myanmar products Malaysia was interested in were granite, marble, minerals, precious stones and even chillies, onions and potatoes, while the Malaysian goods Myanmar was interested in included manufactured products.

"If we want to sell, we also have to buy and this is how we see trading should be and this is how we deal with our partners," he said.

To another question by a Myanmar journalist, he said much had changed in Myanmar since his last visit in 1988 - the country had made good progress since its switch to market economy.

He said: "At that time I remember seeing only two hotels - the Inya Lake and the Strand. But now there are many hotels, a new port and industrial estates. And Myanmar is now in Asean."

On whether he would be attending the upcoming Asia-Europe Meeting in London, now that Myanmar would not be accepted as a member, Dr Mahathir said participants were admitted individually and not by blocs or groups.

Malaysia was a participant at ASEM1 and would participate at ASEM2 because it was not admitting new members from Europe - the same number that attended the first meeting in Bangkok would attend the meeting in London.

To a question by a Financial Times journalist who asked whether George Soros was discussed during the meeting between Myanmar and Malaysian officials, Dr Mahathir said: "Why should we? For a time it was fashionable to do so. Now it is no longer fashionable."

In the morning the Prime Minister visited the Micasa Service Apartments being built in Yangon, the new port in the Thilawa area south of Yangon and the industrial trade zone near it. Later, he was a guest at a lunch hosted by Malaysians in Myanmar.

In his speech, he said Malaysian businessmen in Myanmar should not exhaust their welcome in the country. He said they should also not be too eager to sign memorandums of understandings without first ensuring their capability of consummating their intentions.

As a precaution, they should report their intentions to enter into MoUs to the Malaysian embassy first.

The only English language daily, the 12-page The New Light of Myanmar, devoted whole pages of 1, 2, 3 and 12 and much of pages 6 and 7 to the visit of Dr Mahathir.

Later at the Sultan Abdul Aziz International Airport in Kuala Lumpur, the Prime Minister told a Press conference that Myanmar has progressed significantly since it accepted the market economy, reports Badrul Hisham Mahzan.

Dr Mahathir said there were no investments when the country was under socialism rule, but the situation had changed and there were a lot of investments now.

He said this when asked to comment on the present situation in Myanmar after returning from a two-day visit to the country.

He was accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

"For example, there are now 3,000 hotel rooms in Myanmar, including five-star hotels," he added.

Dr Mahathir also said that there were many industrial estates and new factories set up in the country since then.

Asked to elaborate on the Asean constructive engagement policy with Myanmar, the Prime Minister said they were still working towards it.

"However, the situation (in Myanmar) is more relaxed now."

Several Cabinet Ministers, Deputy Ministers and senior Government officials were among those present at the Bunga Raya lounge to greet the Prime Minister and his wife.

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