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Dr M opens new chancery building

Ahmad A. Talib in Pretoria

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday opened the new chancery building of the country's High Commission for South Africa, declaring that this symbolised Malaysia's commitment and friendship with that country.

In his short speech at the opening ceremony, Dr Mahathir said: "I am proud that Malaysia's relations with South Africa continue to grow from strength to strength.

"I would like to give my assurance that we will always accord the highest priority to our relations with South Africa.

"This new High Commission building symbolises our commitment and friendship with South Africa."

The Prime Minister said he was happy to note the great strides that had been achieved in a relatively short period since the birth of the new South Africa.

Indeed, Dr Mahathir said, South Africans had shown much fortitude and determination in building a new society free from appalling legacies of the apartheid era.

He also paid tribute to South African President Nelson Mandela for his single-minded commitment to national reconciliation in a free and democratic South Africa.

He said this commitment had been inspiring and held the key to South Africa's future.

Dr Mahathir and his entourage arrived this morning and was received at the international airport in Johannesburg by South African Foreign Minister Alfred Nzo and Malaysian High Commissioner Datuk Abdul Kadir Deen.

Abdul Kadir said the new chancery would help promote bilateral relations towards the next millennium and beyond.

Malaysia's total trade with South Africa amounted to US\$447 million (about RM1.8 billion) last year, an increase of more than 27 per cent over 1996. Total trade figures for the first five months of this year came to US\$176.5 million, Abdul Kadir said.

Malaysia's exports are mainly palm oil (about 30 per cent), electronics, chemicals, lubricants and timber which made up most of the country's imports.

The chancery building costs about RM4.5 million. There are eight diplomatic staff with several local employees.

Malaysian interests form an important investment partner for South Africa. According to South African Ministry of Finance figures, Malaysian investments totalled more than US\$3.8 billion in 1994, making it the second biggest investor after the United States.

Malaysian investments are seen in telecommunications, infrastructure, property, hotels and trading, apart from finance and banking.

Nzo, speaking just before Dr Mahathir unveiled the plaque at the opening ceremony, decribed Malaysia as one of the staunchest allies for South Africa before and after apartheid.

"Despite the crisis it is facing at home, Malaysia has maintained a strong presence in South Africa and has continued to invest in sectors considered important to my country," he said.

After the ceremony, Dr Mahathir met Acting President Thabo Mbeki for a four-eyes meeting to discuss bilateral issues.

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