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PM begins 2-day visit to Myanmar, given a warm welcome

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YANGON, Mon: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrived here today for a two-day official visit, his first since Myanmar became the newest member of Asean last July at the same time as Laos.

Dr Mahathir is accompanied by his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, International Trade and Industry Deputy Minister Datuk Kerk Choo Ting and a team of businessmen.

They were welcomed at the airport by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) chairman General Than Shwe. The Prime Minister inspected the guard of honour and was given a 19-gun salute.

His motorcade to the Sein Le Kantha State Guesthouse passed through a highway lined on both sides with schoolchildren waving the Malaysian and Myanmar flags.

Myanmar's daily English newspaper, The New Light of Myanmar, carried a profile of Dr Mahathir on the front page today, while the local news described his visit as that of a "friend".

SPDC secretary I Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt made a courtesy call on Dr Mahathir at the guesthouse, accompanied by Myanmar Foreign Minister U Ohn Gyaw and Myanmar Ambassador to Malaysia Daw Khin Yi.

In the afternoon, both delegations held a meeting at Parliament House where Dr Mahathir and Than Shwe witnessed the signing of two agreements: one on the avoidance of double taxation and the other on visa exemption for holders of diplomatic and official passports.

During his meetings with Myanmar leaders, Dr Mahathir is expected to brief them on the currency problems faced by Asean economies and the outcome of his recent visits to Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore and Brunei.

The Prime Minister is also expected to impress upon Myanmar's leaders the need for Asean to remain united in light of the regional economic turbulence.

He will also explain the proposal to use Asean currencies, instead of the US dollar, in efforts to promote intra-Asean trade.

Tomorrow, Dr Mahathir is scheduled to visit the Micasa Hotel Apartment project, Thilawar port, Hlaingthayar Industrial Zone and meet the Malaysian business community here.

Myanmar, which joined Asean at its last summit in Kuala Lumpur, has a gross domestic product of about US\$31 billion (US\$1 = RM4.04) and an annual growth rate of 6.4 per cent. Its major products are teak, rice and jute.

Its economic objectives include all-round development with agriculture forming the base. It is inviting participation in terms of technical cooperation and foreign direct investments.

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