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Reaffirmation of economic support

Ahmad A. Talib in Johannesburg

MALAYSIA and South Africa again reaffirmed their joint commitment to economic collaboration with the official opening yesterday of Southern Bank of Africa Limited partnered by business interests from both countries.

The bank's opening was jointly officiated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and South African deputy president Thabo Mbeki at the bank's premises at Jellicoe Avenue, Rosebank, Gauteng.

The bank is jointly owned on a 50-50 basis by Killinghall (M) Berhad, the primary shareholder of Southern Bank Berhad in Malaysia, and South Africa's National Empowerment Trust Investment Fund.

Local businessmen said the presence of Dr Mahathir and Mbeki at the bank's opening signifies the strong support given by the leaders to this new endeavour.

The opening of the bank marked the entry into the world of banking and finance at the equity level for South African blacks following the end of apartheid several years ago.

Mbeki, speaking ahead of Dr Mahathir at the function, said the opening of the bank would contribute further to two-way relations, especially now when both countries were making serious efforts to consolidate their economic cooperation.

"It makes us very happy to know that Malaysia, with the problems you are now facing, has not forgotten us ... even in times of your own difficulties, we are remembered.

"The opening of this bank is another attempt by us to free ourselves of economic apartheid. Furthermore, the start of business is another milestone in South-South cooperation actively pursued by Malaysia," Mbeki said.

He recalled the 1980s when Malaysian businessmen were trying to make inroads into South Africa.

"At that time, you were received only by Public Relations Officers because nobody knew or cared. Today, you are received warmly by decision-makers because we know who you are and what you are capable of," Mbeki said.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir said the opening of SBA was further evidence of the confidence that bilateral cooperation would grow stronger in the future. The Prime Minister drew a parallel between Malaysian and South African situations, especially when many quarters had written off both countries after they gained independence and freed themselves from dominance.

Dr Mahathir and Mbeki then toured the bank's premises before returning to the Malaysian-owned Sandton Hilton for a closed-door meeting with Malaysian businessmen who have interests in South Africa.

He left for Namibia in the afternoon to attend the South Africa International Dialogue.

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