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A worthwhile trip that cemented bond

Syed Nadzri in Tokyo

TOKYO: The Asian crisis has not changed the relationship between Japan and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. If anything, it seems to have strengthened the bond between the Asian economic powerhouse and the Prime Minister who created Malaysia's Look East Policy nearly two decades ago.

And so it was expected that his most recent outing in Japan would be a fruitful one. In the six days he was in Nagoya and Tokyo, business deals and an aid package were on the cards. After the successful launch of Malaysia's sovereign bond in the US, the next one could very well be in yen.

Politically, too, the Prime Minister seemed to command tremendous respect among the people he met during the visit.

Dr Mahathir, who arrived in Nagoya on May 29, first had a meeting with Malaysian students with strong words of advice about how fortunate it was for them to be in Japan so that they could learn first-hand from the Japanese.

The students, in turn, expressed their gratitude for the Government's efforts in securing places for them in Japan. In fact, during the dialogue, several of them even voiced their concern whether they would be able to continue their studies if the Government decided to cut costs.

Dr Mahathir spent the next two days in Nagoya making private visits to farms on the outskirts. His aides said he wanted to observe the Japanese way.

Then on Tuesday, the Prime Minister visited Toyota Motor Corp's facilities just outside Nagoya - and talked business with the company's chairman, Mr Shoichiro Toyoda.

Toyoda showed interest in helping Malaysia with its automotive industry and this is certainly a big boost for Malaysia considering that Toyota is not only the biggest carmaker in Japan but also one of the largest companies in the world.

Dr Mahathir said although Toyota was already indirectly involved in the Malaysian car industry through Daihatsu at Perodua, the company could still participate in a bigger way by becoming consultants in small-volume plants.

The Prime Minister may have big plans for the Malaysian car industry, judging from the Toyota visit, because he seemed to be very interested in the things he observed at the Commemorative Museum of Industry, the Toyota Kaikan Exhibition Hall and Toyota Automobile Museum.

In fact he took almost the entire day to cover the three places.

On Wednesday, Dr Mahathir was in Tokyo, capping his visit by getting the Japanese Government to express interest in providing guarantees to sovereign bonds to be issued by Malaysia.

The interest was conveyed by Japanese Vice-Minister for International Affairs in the Ministry of Finance Eisuke Sakakibara who emerged smiling from a one-hour meeting with Dr Mahathir to volunteer a statement to the Press about Tokyo's keenness in the matter.

He even said Japan was eager to start talks to work out details of the bond guarantee.

Sakakibara, dubbed "Mr Yen" because he wields great influence in the financial affairs of the Japanese Government, was all praise for Malaysia which he said adopted the correct policies to overcome the economic crisis which hit the region in 1997.

Dr Mahathir's functions in Tokyo were well received and at the dialogues, the questions just kept coming in, signifying great interest in the man and the country.

His one-hour meeting with editors of major Japanese newspapers appeared too short because they wanted to ask him more, including issues not related to Malaysia.

At the launch of the Japanese version of the Prime Minister's book "A New Deal for Asia", publisher Shigero Tsugamura said he was making business out of the book because he believed in Dr Mahathir and Malaysia. During the news conference that followed, Dr Mahathir was asked to give his opinion on many issues, including those concerning Japan's relations with China and the US.

His speech at the Nikkei conference on the future of Asia was a philosophical one, somewhat reflecting his frustrations about what had happened that caused the region to be hit by the economic crisis.

In the speech, Dr Mahathir outlined three imperatives for Asia to recover - to work on its strengths, to reform and to be practical.

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