

13/08/1999

PM's visit set to boost joint ventures

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to China from August 18 to 20 is expected not only to further enhance diplomatic relations but also result in more joint-venture projects including in the automotive field between the two countries.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said among the joint ventures to be discussed is the setting up of the Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Bhd (Proton) plant in one of the provinces in China.

"China is also keen to set up a pulp and paper factory in Sabah," he told reporters in Kuala Lumpur yesterday after delivering a lecture on "Malaysia's Direction in the International Arena in the New Millennium."

Dr Mahathir's visit is at the invitation of Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China.

In China, Dr Mahathir is also scheduled to call on Chinese President Jiang Zemin and hold an official meeting with Zhu to discuss bilateral issues especially on trade and investment.

Syed Hamid said the leaders will also discuss the opening of Malaysia's new consulate in Shanghai and other joint-venture projects in pulp, paper and banking.

Dr Mahathir will also deliver a keynote address at a Malaysia-China Forum and officiate an exhibition to promote Malaysian products at the Beijing Parkson Shopping Centre.

The Prime Minister will also visit the Russian provinces of Khabarovsk from August 15 and Buryatia from August 20 to August 22.

In Khabarovsk, Dr Mahathir will visit the Russian aircraft manufacturing plant in Komosolmsk and shipbuilding centre and timber industry at Na Amur.

Dr Mahathir will also hold a meeting with the province's administrative head Ishaev Victor Ivanovich and other Khabarovsk leaders.

In Buryatia, Dr Mahathir will hold discussions with its president and leaders. He will also visit aircraft and helicopter manufacturing plants in Ulan Ude and Irkutsk.

"Dr Mahathir will also tour a Malaysian pine forest concession (by Rimpunan Hijau) in Khabarovsk and discuss potential joint ventures with aircraft manufacturers in Buryatia," he said.

During the visits, Dr Mahathir will be accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Lim Keng Yaik, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Ling Liong Sik, Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon and other officials.

Asked if Dr Mahathir will announce the date for the general elections after he returns from the trips, Syed Hamid said: "I do not know. This is something none of us knows. It is the privilege of the Prime Minister.

"However, he has indicated that it will be soon," he added.

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