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Zhu praises Dr M for efforts to strengthen bilateral ties

Kamarul Yunus in Beijing

BEIJING, Wed: Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, calling Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad "an old friend of China's people", paid tribute to the Malaysian Prime Minister for his efforts to strengthen ties between the two countries.

Over the years, both Kuala Lumpur and Beijing have put in a great deal of work to promote friendship, closer relations and cooperation, and this gather further momentum following the current visit by Dr Mahathir, Zhu said in his welcoming speech.

"In the run-up to the turn of the century, and in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of Malaysia-Sino diplomatic relations, your (Dr Mahathir) visit to China with a high profile delegation shows that you have attached great importance to our relations," he said.

In response, Dr Mahathir noted the progress achieved by China and the rapid changes taken place.

"I have been visiting China quite often. Everytime I come here, I notice changes... China has made a lot of progress.

"In Malaysia, we are watching China's progress very closely because it has great importance for the development of our country," he said.

The Prime Minister arrived here today for a three-day working visit during which he will also meet Chinese President Jiang Zemin and address a Malaysia-China business conference. This is Dr Mahathir's fifth visit to the country as Prime Minister. The previous one was in 1996.

Malaysia was the first Asean member to establish diplomatic relations with China. It followed a historic visit to Beijing in May 1974 by the then Prime Minister, the late Tun Abdul Razak. The occasion has since been commemorated on May 31 each year.

And this year, the celebrations during Dr Mahathir's visit include a dinner for nearly 800 guests which will be hosted by the Malaysia-China Friendship Association at the China World Hotel tomorrow. Dr Mahathir is patron of the association.

Mr Qian Qichen, one of China's four vice-premiers and a member of the politburo of the Communist Party of China, will represent his country at the anniversary dinner.

At their meeting today, Dr Mahathir and Zhu also witnessed the signing of several agreements and a memorandums of understanding (MOUs) between Chinese and Malaysian parties.

The Academy of Sciences of Malaysia entered into separate agreements on scientific, engineering and technological cooperation with the Chinese Academy of Engineering, and the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

Lion Forest Industries Sdn Bhd, Innoprise Corp Sdn Bhd and China Fuxin Pulp and Paper Industries Co Ltd formalised a US\$1 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80) forest plantation and pulp and paper mill joint venture.

Padiberas Nasional Bhd and China's National Cereals, Oils and Foodstuffs Import and Export Corp meanwhile signed an MOU on counter-trade involving the exchange of Chinese rice for Malaysian palm oil.

Tomorrow, the Prime Minister will fly to Dalian to meet President Jiang.

At mid-day, he will speak on "Malaysia-China Relations: Challenges and Opportunities in the 21st Century" at the third Malaysia-China Forum organised by Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute.

Dr Mahathir leaves Beijing for Ulan Ude in the Republic of Buryatia on Friday.

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