

# KL's call to Islamabad

NST 29.3.2000

## Dr Mahathir: Democracy still the best

By Patvinder Singh

PIJTRAJAYA, Tues — Malaysia today urged Pakistan to return to a democratic system through civilian rule.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made the call during a meeting with Pakistan's chief executive General Pervez Musharraf at the Prime Minister's Department here.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said Musharraf briefed Dr Mahathir on the reasons behind the coup.

"He said it was a spontaneous action and not planned but happened according to the wishes of the people," he said.

Syed Hamid said Musharraf had explained that the Pakistani armed forces had taken over to ensure law and order, good governance, stability and to ensure that Pakistan could develop economically.

Another reason was to ensure that riches and wealth could be utilised for the benefit of the country's citizens.

Musharraf arrived here yesterday on a three-day working visit. He ousted former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup on Oct 12 last year.

Syed Hamid said Dr Mahathir, while understanding the situation in Pakistan, felt that Pakistan eventually needed to return to a democratic system through civilian

rule.

"This was also stressed by Musharraf who said he did not have any intention of ruling indefinitely but was more interested in bringing about normalcy, stability and economic progress and would relinquish power to civilians."

Syed Hamid said that Musharraf could not give a date when that would take place and Dr Mahathir felt that whatever the shortcomings of democracy, it was still the best form of government although "liberal democracy" being practised in the West could not be adopted.

"Musharraf said that now there was actually more Press freedom and democracy and the essence of democracy was being practised (in Pakistan)," said Syed Hamid.

On Malaysia's diplomatic relations with Pakistan, he said Malaysia abided by the Commonwealth's decision to suspend Pakistan's activities in the organisation but its membership was not suspended.

He said all Commonwealth countries had diplomatic ties with Pakistan.

"We are quite happy with our bilateral relations."

"We want to enhance that as we think that notwithstanding the Commonwealth position, there is a need to engage Pakistan and encourage it to go back to civilian rule."

Syed Hamid said the two leaders also discussed economic co-opera-

tion and bilateral relations in the context of Pakistan being a member of the Organisation of Islamic Conference.

He said the Pakistani delegation also sought views on Pakistan's economic recovery and how Malaysians could invest there.

Syed Hamid said Malaysia was interested but needed "certainty" in Pakistan in terms of laws and bureaucracy, adding that trade balance was in Malaysia's favour.

Ways will be sought to rectify the situation.

Musharraf's assistance is sought in resolving issues relating to Tenaga Nasional Berhad's power generation project in Pakistan.

He said the first phase of the project had started and approval was being sought for the second phase to begin.

Syed Hamid said the second phase would require an investment of US\$50 million (RM190 million) which would be a boost to the Pakistani economy.

Both leaders agreed that a joint commission meeting be held as soon as possible to enable issues to be addressed, adding that it would be held this year in Pakistan.

Syed Hamid said Dr Mahathir hoped the case against former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif would be conducted according to the process of law and that it also be conducted in a way that did not elicit negative views from the international community.