

01/10/2000

Abdullah's four-day visit serves to further strengthen ties with Japan

Ramlan Said

MALAYSIA has always enjoyed good relations with Japan and the four-day working visit by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, which ended yesterday, managed to further strengthen ties.

The close relationship could be seen from the fact that Abdullah's visit was the second in three months by Malaysia's top leadership.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in the country last June, having visited Japan many times before.

"Visits such as this are important as they help establish friendship and co-operation with Japanese leaders. Compared to other developing countries, not many have taken our approach," said Malaysian ambassador to Japan, Datuk M.N. Marzuki.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Malaysia has emerged as Japan's main trading partner among the Asean countries, constituting 3.3 per cent of its global trade.

Abdullah has expressed satisfaction over the visit, saying he had gained added perspective to many facets of bilateral ties between both countries.

Most significant was the pledge by the Japan Federation of Economic Organisations, known as Keidanren, to continue with its trade and investment in Malaysia.

The association, in a meeting with Abdullah, said it appreciated the economic measures introduced by the Government during the financial crisis, noting that they had produced considerable success.

Keidanren's endorsement augured well for the Malaysian economy as the organisation's membership includes more than 1,000 of Japan's leading corporations as well as 118 groups representing major sectors such as manufacturing, trade, distribution, finance and energy.

Abdullah was also a strong believer of the Asean Plus Three framework, which groups the 10 Asean countries and its three powerful northeast neighbours - Japan, China and South Korea.

He feels Malaysia and Asean have to make full use of this platform of co-operation, especially in view of the clout held by Japan as the world's second largest economy.

The framework can become a powerful force especially in articulating to Japan's other trading partners, like in the G7, of Malaysia's views on matters like the Asian Monetary Fund and reforms to the international financial architecture.

Marzuki described Abdullah's visit as significant as the programmes had been planned to enable him to meet "the people that mattered" - Japanese parliamentarians, media and businessmen.

Besides the Keidanren, the Deputy Prime Minister also had a dialogue with senior editors of Japanese newspapers and a meeting with members of the Japan-Malaysia Parliamentarian League.

"The meetings will provide the Deputy Prime Minister with an opportunity to explain various matters concerning the country... it will also allow both sides to bounce ideas," said Marzuki ahead of Abdullah's arrival last Tuesday.

True enough, Abdullah did much explaining at the meeting with Keidanren as concerns had been raised by Japanese businessmen over Malaysia's ability to maintain peace and stability.

Recent events in Malaysia, like the hostage-taking incidents off Sabah waters by foreign gunmen and the Grik arms heist by a group of religious

extremists, must have caught the attention of many Japanese businessmen.

Abdullah, who is also Home Minister, told businessmen that the Government was committed to preserving peace and would act firmly against anyone trying to sow the seeds of instability.

The Japan-Malaysia Parliamentary League was another aspect of relations that ought to be pursued as it could nurture co-operation at another level of importance - between the countries' lawmakers.

The Japanese chapter has been established; Abdullah said the Malaysian side was expected to be formed soon.

The Japanese league, led by its chairman Takeo Hiranuma, who is also Japan's Minister of International Trade and Industry, has suggested an exchange of information and views on various trade, economic and other issues that are brought up in the parliaments of both countries.

The league could act as a bridge to further strengthen the ties already cemented by Malaysian and Japanese leaders.

One interesting place visited by Abdullah while in Tokyo was the city's Wan Aqua-Line, a 15km toll highway running across the central portion of Tokyo Bay from the east to west, connecting Kawasaki and Kisarazu.

What's special about this crossing, which took 20 years to build from concept designing to construction, is its part-bridge, part-undersea tunnel concept and its man-made island called Umihotaru, which rises from where the highways shift from the tunnels to the bridge.

Notwithstanding the cost required, it will be wonderful if a similar project could be built in Malaysia as it could turn out to be another tourist attraction, as what the Aqua-Line has now become.

Abdullah also had a dialogue with Malaysian students in Japan and had dinner with them at the Malaysian embassy.

Not many raised questions but one student lamented the high cost of living in Japan, which in another way of saying, "please have another look at our scholarships".

This is not surprising as plain white rice costs RM7 while a plate of simple nasi goreng (fried rice) costs RM35.

The prices are reasonable to the Japanese but Malaysians would think twice before patronising these eateries.

(END)