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Dr M to have a tight schedule in Bosnia

Ahirudin Attan in Sarajevo

SARAJEVO, Tues: Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit here tomorrow may last just six hours but its significance could extend well beyond Bosnia's up-coming general elections on November 3.

Judging from his schedule, the Prime Minister would in half a day meet a cross-section of the people in Sarajevo wider than one can expect to in a week.

He will give two interviews: the first for the Bosnian television and the second for Ljiljan, the newspaper company that also publishes "New Deal za Asijn", Dr Mahathir's book translated into the Bosnian language.

Dr Mahathir will also meet a Muslim group in Starigrad, the old Ottoman market where the historic Bey Mosque is located, and visit the Camil Sijaric school in Dobrinjai, a pre-dominantly Muslim area in this warravaged capital city.

In addition, the Prime Minister will present to President Alija Izetbegovic a cheque for 200,000 marks (1 mark = RM1.71), which is outside the US\$24 million (US\$1 = RM3.80) the Malaysian Government has pledged for the reconstruction of Bosnia-Herzegovina. He will also hand over a cheque for RM200,000 on behalf of Badan Bertindak Bosnia for the reconstruction of Bey Mosque.

On his schedule as well is a lecture he will give at the University of Sarajevo.

The highlight of the visit will be a "four-eye meeting" between Dr Mahathir and Izetbegovic, the agenda for which not even Prime Minister Edhem Bicakcic can claim privy.

"It's a meeting between two old friends," Bicakcic told Malaysian journalists.

Before this meeting, Izetbegovic accompanied by members of the Presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina Zivko Radisic and Ante Jelavic will pay Dr Mahathir a courtesy call.

Economic cooperation, the usual theme in Dr Mahathir's visits, will undoubtedly be an emphasis in his meeting with Izetbegovic but officials and diplomats speculate that this time politics may be a major discussion point.

Dr Mahathir's meeting with the President will be the last before the latter steps down this week to pave the way for the elections next month.

Dr Mahathir is a major influence in Izetbegovic's administration whose economic policies seem to be guided by some of Malaysia's own economic programmes and strategies, including privatization.

Some quarters felt that his visit could bolster the SDA's chances in the general elections. The SDA, led by the President, is the only Islamic political party left in Europe, according to diplomats.

But even in the context of economic and investment ties, there is much the two countries have covered and need to cover. Prime Minister Bicakcic said there are various privatization projects to be opened up in the next five years where the Malaysian investment ringgit will come in very handy.

To date, the Malaysian private sector has played quite a prominent role as an investor in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Malaysian companies are also active in helping with the reconstruction of Bosnia, while Malaysians, through donations, have also made a impression on Bosnians' daily life.

The Camil Sijaric school, which sits some 1,000 primary school students, was built in October 1997 from money contributed by Malaysian school

teachers and pupils.

Bicakcic said the gross domestic product of Bosnia-Herzegovina expanded by an average 21 per cent in the last four years. Since the Dayton Peace Agreement, the country has reconstructed all schools, healthcare centres and telecommunication lines.

The economy still has to create jobs to cope with the return of Bosnian refugees to their pre-war homes. Bicakcic said his country needs to create 260,000 jobs immediately and because of limited resources, Bosnia must look up to the international community for assistance.

Dr Mahathir's visit is significant, he said, because Bosnia would like to emulate Malaysia's success as well as to borrow the Malaysian Prime Minister's ideas. Bicakcic made references to some of the ideas discussed by Dr Mahathir in his book "New Deal for Asia".

The international community, especially the European Union and the Islamic countries, have been very helpful. "Most members of the UN are for Bosnia, but there are some which do not think that Bosnia has a unique situation," he said.

The latest development in the Balkans - the defeat of Slobodan Milosevic in the Serbian election - is having a positive effect on the Bosnians and the region, however.

"We are more confident... but reconstruction will not be achieved overnight. (Milosevic) is the true source of evil... his defeat has a positive effect on Bosnia," Bicakcic said.

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