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Malaysia seeking more than a handshake in the new Indonesia

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MANY Malaysians are looking for more than a handshake in Indonesia nowadays. In fact, Malaysians - whether they are civil servants, businessmen or politicians - will be hoping that their handshakes with Indonesians here would help them grasp, pardon the pun, more of the new Indonesia under Abdurrahman Wahid.

The Indonesian President, the fourth after Sukarno, Suharto and B.J. Habibie, is also hoping that a handshake between his countrymen and Malaysians this week would yield results that will be mutually beneficial and profitable. In fact, for a few days beginning yesterday, scores of Malaysian businessmen are descending on the Indonesian capital seeking new businesses, fact-finding, establishing contacts and building bridges with their counterparts here.

In a nutshell, this is the substance of the official visit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Indonesia. This is a visit that will hopefully pave the way for greater political, economic and social collaboration between two important neighbours amidst the Asean family. Malaysia, apparently, needs to get to know Indonesia all over again. Malaysians need to understand the present Indonesian psyche especially after the 210 million, predominantly Muslims, had undergone major changes and shocks themselves.

In many parts of Indonesia, the local population themselves are trying to understand the changing ways, the changing administration and bureaucracy which govern their lives.

The Indonesia of today and the Indonesia of not so long ago when it was under Suharto and Habibie are two different entities.

And most Malaysians are in fact trying to understand the Indonesia of today so that a meaningful bilateral relationship can be built and strengthened.

Dr Mahathir's entourage, which includes four senior Cabinet Ministers and more than 150 of the country's who's who in commerce and industry, touches down today in what could be a major attempt by both countries to re-establish links for the new millennium.

The fact that Gus Dur himself would greet the Prime Minister on his arrival at the airport is, observers say, an important statement by itself. And allowing a business forum to be attended by businessmen of both countries at the Istana Merdeka is another testimony to the importance which Gus Dur and the Indonesian administration attach to this visit.

As articulated by Malaysian Ambassador to Indonesia, Datuk Rastam Mohd Isa: "Who are we dealing with? Who are we going to do business with? Mind you, at one time there were only a handful of Ministers who had Cabinet experience, which means that we have to go round shaking hands and getting acquainted all over again."

Rastam's point bears scrutiny by all. Indonesia under Gus Dur appears to be heading toward some rationalisation, despite recent controversy such as the appointment of Henry Kissinger as his political adviser.

Gus Dur, many here also say, knows what he's doing and Malaysian businessmen who seek to widen their commercial and industrial interest should pay heed to whatever is happening here.

There were questions raised as to Indonesia's stability but there are signs of reforms being gradually implemented to help regain the people's

and the international observers' confidence in the country. Military reforms, strengthening the police force and consequently the enforcement of law and order are signs that business can thrive again in the once riot-torn Indonesia.

Abdurrahman, too, knows the significance of getting more Malaysians interested in Indonesia again. Cumulative investments by Malaysians in this country peaked at US\$7.6 billion (RM28.9 billion) mostly in plantation. There's also potential in tourism.

A number of Indonesian companies are also in need of fresh funds to revitalise them, and this looks promising especially to cash-rich Malaysian companies. State-owned companies, too, are looking for suitors while Indonesia would very much like to see renewed interest in the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) in the north and south.

While economic collaboration would be the lynchpin in Malaysia-Indonesia relations, one cannot ignore the importance of a get-together between two neighbours who can further lend credence to regional co-operation in Asean.

For Asean to be strong and relevant, the bond of friendship between these two countries is not only essential but also crucial.

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