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Malaysia to boost cooperation, trade with Bosnia

Ahirudin Attan in Sarajevo

SARAJEVO: Malaysia and Bosnia-Herzegovina "renewed" the close cooperation they had before the Asian meltdown with new initiatives to boost trade and investment.

Making his first visit to this country since the 1997 economic crisis, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said new areas of cooperation, as well as the companies that will participate in the new initiatives, have been identified.

At the same time, Malaysia has agreed to buy more products from Bosnia-Herzegovina to improve bilateral trade.

"Now that Malaysia has recovered from the crisis, we are in a better position to cooperate with Bosnia-Herzegovina," Dr Mahathir told a press conference held with President Alija Izetbegovic at the presidential palace here.

"In our discussions, we identified areas where we can work together, even the companies to be involved in these projects.

"Some Yugoslav companies were active in Malaysia, especially in the construction sector, during the pre-war period. Most of them were from Sarajevo. We hope that these companies can once again be active and take part in construction activities in Malaysia.

"We hope at the same time to identify products we can buy from Bosnia to improve bilateral trade. It is for these reasons I have brought with me businessmen from Malaysia on this visit," Dr Mahathir said.

MBI Ventures managing director Zaini Amra, Airod Sdn Bhd president Tan Sri Ahmad Johan and Construction Industry Development Board chief executive officer Datuk Abdul Rahman Abdullah formed part of the Prime Minister's team during the delegation meeting with Izetbegovic and his senior ministers.

Also present were Shafiz Abdullah, the assistant special functions officer in the Prime Minister's Department, Hatimi Abas, Charge d'Affaires at the Malaysian Embassy in Sarajevo, and Saharuddin Hassan, the embassy's first secretary.

Izetbegovic, in his remarks, spoke to Dr Mahathir as "one of the closest friends of Bosnia-Herzegovina".

"I would like to express the gratitude of my Government and people as well as my own for his support during he way and in peace time. Malaysia is the first country to recognise Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent country," he said through an interpreter.

Izetbegovic said he is happy that Malaysia has recovered from the Asian economic crisis and expressed the hope that businessmen from both countries will work to step up cooperation.

The Bosnian president is tipped to step down tomorrow, ahead of the country's November 3 general election. His ruling party's success in the reconstruction of the country is expected to be a major factor in the outcome of the election.

Further success in the reconstruction will hinge on the support of foreign countries, including Malaysia.

Malaysia was one of the earliest to be involved in the economic redevelopment of Bosnia-Herzegovina, apart from being the loudest voice at the United Nations and other international forums that, in the end, pressured the international community to end Serb aggression against Bosnian Muslims.

Senior officials of the Bosnian ruling party, SDA, hinted that Dr Mahathir's visit could help Izetbegovic rally the support of the Muslim electorate before next month's election. The SDA is the only Islamic political party left in Europe, they said.

There was, however, no mention of political issues at the joint press conference by Dr Mahathir and Izetbegovic.

Dr Mahathir arrived at Sarajevo airport slightly after noon and was met by Izetbegovic and the two members of the Presidency, Zivco Radisic and Ante Jelavic. He later had a closed-door session with the Bosnian president.

At the press conference, Dr Mahathir presented Izetbegovic with Dm200,000 (Dm1 = RM1.72) for the reconstruction of Srebrenica. The money is from public donations and is over and above some US\$24 million (US\$1 = RM3.80) the Malaysian Government had pledged for the reconstruction of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Later in the afternoon, after two interviews - with the television of Bosnia and the Ljijan newspaper - Dr Mahathir visited Bey Mosque and presented a cheque for US\$67,000 on behalf of Badan Bertindak Bosnia, to help with the reconstruction of the mosque.

Dr Mahathir also visited Camil Sijaric School, built in 1997 with donations from Malaysian school children and their teachers, before leaving for Kuala Lumpur.

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