

# Mahathir to hold talks with Myanmar PM

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MALAYSIAN Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrived yesterday for a week-long stay in Myanmar, two days ahead of a visit by a United Nations (UN) special envoy charged with brokering a dialogue between the military regime and its democratic opposition.

Dr Mahathir was welcomed at Yangon airport by Senior Gen Than Shwe, Myanmar's Prime Minister. He was joined by a delegation of 30 government and business officials, Myanmar officials said.

Mahathir was due to hold formal talks with Than Shwe yesterday, and meet with representatives of the Malaysian community in Yangon. He would then depart today for a six-day private holiday off the country's southern coast, officials said.

Dr Mahathir has been a leading advocate of the military regime, saying it will eventually bring about economic improvement and political change.

The Malaysian leader played a pivotal role in shepherding Myanmar into the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) in 1997 despite heavy criticism from

Western nations who said isolation would be the best way to force democratic reform.

Since Myanmar's entry into Asean, however, foreign investment dwindled dramatically after the Asian economic crisis struck in 1997, badly hurting Myanmar's main sources of capital.

The military, which has ruled Myanmar since 1962, still refuses to hold talks with the prodemocracy party of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy (NLD) party swept elections in 1990 but was not allowed to take power.

Last Friday, UN special envoy Tan Sri Razali Ismail will begin a five-day visit to Myanmar, his third since his appointment in April, on a mission to broker dialogue between the regime and the NLD.

That prospect appears distant. Suu Kyi has been kept under virtual house arrest for the past three months after she defied authorities' heavy restrictions by attempting to travel outside the capital to meet with members of her party. — AP