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INDIAN Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was to have visited Malaysia from Feb 7 to 10, but the trip had to be rescheduled following the Jan 26 earthquake in Gujarat.

Vajpayee gave an exclusive interview to Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, assisted by Ashraf Abdullah and Carolyn Hong, in New Delhi on Feb 2.

With his daily schedule hastily re-arranged to cope with the earthquake calamity, Vajpayee spent 17 minutes with the *NST*, but provided lengthy answers to questions sent two weeks earlier.

Of the 24 questions sent, 17 were answered. The seven which did not receive a response included those on extremist attacks on Christians, the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya and the situation in Amritsar.

The other unanswered questions were on the tariff structure on Malaysian palm oil, the position of Malaysian medical students, the agreements and memorandums of understanding to be signed during his visit, and the pressures caused by India's increasing population.

However, the Malaysian media will still have the opportunity to ask these questions when the Prime Minister arrives here.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in an interview with *The Hindu*, had already made clear Malaysia's position over the Babri mosque issue.

Dr Mahathir said, "In one square mile, sometimes you can have as many as four to five Hindu temples because we are tolerant of other

religions and, although Islam is fairly rigid in its stance, here in Malaysia we tolerate other religions and we expect that India, (with) its majority made up of Hindus, would have the same kind of tolerance for not just Islam, but for other religions.

"We regret, of course, if you destroy a mosque (a reference to the demolition of the Babri Masjid). It is something that hurt our feelings, we cannot bring ourselves to say, well, let the mosque be destroyed ... that will not be acceptable to our people."

PM Vajpayee: I am happy to meet you.

Abdullah: Let me introduce my team comprising assistant news editor Ashraf Abdullah, specialist writer Carolyn Hong and photographer Hamsiah Abu Bakar.

We are even happier to be here. Thank you very much for receiving me and my team. It is a privilege to be in New Delhi. We are saddened by what happened in Gujarat. Malaysia has sent a 25-member SMART team to assist in the search and rescue mission. Our newspaper has also sent a team to report on the earthquake. We will do our bit to assist in whatever way we can. (The *NST* has launched the Gujarat Earthquake Fund).

Abdullah: How is your health, Mr Prime Minister?

PM (smiling): I have fully recovered. I am fit now, thank you.

Abdullah: Are you looking forward to your visit to Malaysia as it has been some time since an Indian Prime Minister visited India?

PM: Yes, I am looking forward to visiting Kuala Lumpur. Thank you for Malaysia's assistance (in the aftermath of the earthquake) and your efforts.

Abdullah: What are your expectations from this visit?

PM: I am looking forward to meeting your great leaders and exchanging ideas with them. There are many areas that we can work on. We can have parliamentary exchanges as well as trade exchanges. As you rightly said, it has been some time since an Indian Head of Government made a visit to Malaysia.

BELOW is the transcript of the Q&A received from the Prime Minister's Office:

NST: There has been a gap of about six years since India's head of Government visited Malaysia. Former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao came to Malaysia in August 1995, and Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad reciprocated in December 1996. Despite the irregular visits, Malaysia and India have enjoyed good relations. What type of bilateral ties does India want with Malaysia in the new millennium?

PM: India and Malaysia have always enjoyed close and cordial relations, enriched by our civilisational links and by similar outlook, as developing countries, on a number of international issues. In today's technological age and globalising world, India and Malaysia have a number of overlapping interests and coinciding concerns.

We have synergies, which can be exploited to optimise our economic co-operation. We have a common striving for a multipolar world and a co-operative global security order rooted in pluralism.

Exchanges of high level visits serve to provide fresh impetus and political direction to bilateral relations. I hope my forthcoming visit will help to launch our bilateral relationship into a qualitatively new level of partnership in the new millennium.

NST: India is Malaysia's largest trading partner in South Asia. In 1999, total bilateral trade amounted to US\$2.568 billion (almost RM10 billion). The balance of trade has persistently been in Malaysia's favour, registering RM5.531 billion in 1999.

Malaysia and India also signed a key bilateral trade accord last year. What new avenues of trade can the two countries embark on?

PM: Malaysia is our prime trading partner in Asean. India remains the largest buyer of Malaysian palm oil. In recent years, our bilateral trade had been somewhat affected by the financial disruptions of 1997, but it is now poised to increase rapidly.

We believe there is considerable scope to enhance our trade by diversifying the range of products. For two countries with our geographical proximity and economic capability, a trade turnover of US\$2.6 billion does not reflect the full potential. There are technological compatibilities in our economies, which closer interaction between our business com-

munities would help to exploit.

The upbeat assessment in Indian business circles of the potential for co-operation with Malaysia can be gauged from the size and level of the Indian business delegation, which will be in Malaysia coinciding with my visit. The bilateral trade agreement signed in October last year should help identify new

ways of augmenting our trade, as well as to address the imbalance.

NST: Like India, Malaysia had previously used English as its first language but made it a second language after independence. As a result, the standard of English in Malaysia has declined while in India, the decline has not been as noticeable.

How has India managed to maintain a relatively high standard of proficiency in English, and how can India help countries like Malaysia in the teaching of English as a second language?

During the British era, there had been quite a number of Indian teachers in Malaysia, largely to teach science, mathematics and

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English.

PM: After our Independence, Hindi became the national language of India. English remained an official language, and is still taught in a large number of our schools, along with Hindi and the local language. In a number of schools, particularly in urban areas, English is the medium of instruction.

In virtually every English-

speaking country in the world, and in many non-English countries, you will find Indian teachers of science, mathematics and English at all levels in the educational system. Under our programme of technical and economic co-operation, we have sent teachers to several developing countries.

NST: Cultural ties between the two countries have been well established, and Malaysians of Indian descent continue to have a strong affinity for India.

Malaysia is currently undergoing the process of nation-building, and Malaysian-Indians are a very important part of this process even though they are a minority, albeit a substantial minority.

What message will you have for the Malaysian-Indians about their role as Malaysians, rather than as an extended community of Indians from India?

PM: The Indian diaspora today includes millions of people all over the world. Their cultural background and ancestral links connect them to India. This connection has not prevented their harmonious integration into the political, economic and social life of their country of adoption and citizenship. Malaysians of Indian origin are no exception.

They have made, and are continuing to make, a significant contribution in all aspects of Malaysia's development. I wish them well in their patriotic endeavours. At the same time, they form an important cultural bridge, which can strengthen the co-operation between our two countries to mutual benefit.

NST: Like the Chinese diaspora, Indians overseas, especially in the United States, are seen as being much more successful. Why is this so and will there be a deliberate policy to encourage Indians abroad to return to invest in India?

PM: We rejoice in the extraordinary successes that the Indian diaspora has achieved all over the world. They have been earned with hard work and enterprise. Their achievements span all fields of human endeavour. The Indian diaspora has retained cultural affinities with India.

With the advent of globalisation and our own economic liberalisation policies, a number of people of Indian origin have been investing in projects in India and a number of others are working in India for companies from their own countries. We welcome this additional dimension in the interaction of the diaspora with the country of their origin.

NST: Tourism has major potential for both Malaysia and India. One of the major complaints of tourists from both countries is the visa requirement. How can the flow of tourists between the two countries be increased?

PM: I agree with you that tourism is an area of great potential for our two countries. We propose to enter into a bilateral agreement with Malaysia on tourism, which should encourage growth in our tourist exchanges. I believe that promotion

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of tourism is not only important for our economic co-operation, it also intensifies the people to people relationship, which provides the real meaning and substance to relations between countries. We welcome the prospect of more Malaysians spending their leisure time in India. They will not have any problems in obtaining visas for India.

NST: Having enjoyed close and fruitful ties for many decades, Malaysia is disappointed with the nuclear tests which India carried out. On Jan 16, it was reported that India had test-fired a longer range missile. What is the rationale for such a move?

PM: India's exercise of the nuclear option was a considered response to developments in its security environment. These developments are well known and were there for all to see for many years preceding our nuclear tests.

The decision which my Government took was, in our judgment, in the best security interests of the billion people of India. I am happy that the world has today a better appreciation of the reasons behind our nuclear tests and our missile programme.

NST: What type of confidence-building measures are needed to ensure the region continues to enjoy peace, harmony and stability? Will India give to others in the region and elsewhere the assurance it will not resort to "nuclear first strike" and that it is not sparking off an arms race in South Asia?

PM: India has always striven for peace in South Asia. We have sought to live in harmony with all our neighbours. Except in the case of one country, we have succeeded in this endeavour. Unfortunately, we have been victims of a vicious form of cross-border terrorism fed by religious extremism. This has led to tensions on our borders, which we have been constantly seeking to defuse.

No one should be in any doubt that our military profile, nuclear or conventional, is postulated entirely on self-defence. We have never threatened the use of force against any country. We are totally against an arms race. We do, however, have to maintain a minimum nuclear deterrent to guard against military adventurism on the part of irresponsible forces.

NST: India's long-standing feud with Pakistan has brought about three wars, profoundly effecting the stability of the region. Despite many overtures, the two sides have not embarked on serious efforts to set aside differences.

Does this mean that the region has little hope but to expect the issue to continue to be a possible flashpoint for this area?

PM: India has always endeavoured to establish good neighbourly ties with Pakistan. It was for this reason that India took the initiative in 1998 to set up a Composite Dialogue Process, which seeks to build trust and confidence, to establish a stable structure of co-operation, and to address all outstanding issues.

It was also with this objective that I visited Lahore in February 1999. Pakistan responded by launching its armed intrusion and aggression at Kargil a few months later. Pakistan has consistently reacted to our initiatives for good neighbourly relations with hostility and with continued sponsorship of cross-border terrorism and propaganda against India.

It is obvious that for the resumption of the Composite Dialogue Process, to which India remains com-

mitted, an appropriate environment is required. Pakistan needs to end its sponsorship of cross-border terrorism and hostile propaganda against India in order to create such an environment.

NST: The Kashmir crisis has been a long-drawn-out thorny issue in the region which has already claimed the lives of more than 30,000 people.

What steps are being taken to bring about an amicable settlement?

PM: We strongly desire the return to normalcy and peace in Jammu and Kashmir. The onus for the troubled situation in the State rests squarely with terrorist groups, including those based in Pakistan. The responsibility also rests with Pakistan, which has for over a decade sponsored cross-border terrorism in the State. We have acted with great restraint in the face of grave provocation.

The people of the State have also shown remarkable resilience and commitment to democratic process. In order to encourage the terrorists to return to the path of peace and sanity, the Government of India

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has taken the initiative to instruct its security forces not to initiate combat operations against terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir. This decision was widely welcomed by the people of the State.

Predictably, the forces of terrorism and violence are trying to sabotage the prospects of peace by escalating the level of violence in the State and elsewhere in India. What is particularly despicable is the attempt to justify cross-border terrorism as *Jihad*. This is a grave travesty of a great faith. On our part, we are determined to continue our efforts for peace and defeat all attempts to sabotage it.

NST: The relationship between India and China has much improved. The two countries have seen high-level bilateral exchanges like the visit of Chinese leader Li Peng to India.

However, contentious issues such as border disputes still remain. Do you see Sino-Indian relations moving towards a lasting relationship?

PM: India attaches importance to the development of friendly and good neighbourly relations with China on the basis of Panchsheel (Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence) and mutual sensitivity to each other's concerns. During the recent visit of NPC Chairman Li Peng, we emphasised our readiness

India and China are developing wide-ranging co-operation in many areas, ranging from new areas like information technology to more traditional ones like coal mining. Our bilateral trade has seen a significant increase in the year 2000 to over US\$2.5 billion.

As two large developing countries in Asia, we believe that co-operation between us is in the interest of our two peoples as well as the interest of Asia and the world. We look forward to further developing our relationship in the years to come.

NST: India is essentially a secular nation but has always had difficulty uniting its people. In the past decade, with the Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition in power, India has seen simmering discontent among the various religious groups especially the Muslim and Christian minorities.

What guarantee can India give that it will remain a secular nation and that the rights of minorities are scrupulously protected?

PM: For well over 50 years of our existence as an independent country, India has demonstrated the strength and coherence of its multi-religious, multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic society. Tolerance and secularism are concepts ingrained in our national cultural ethos; they are also enshrined in our constitution.

My government is fully conscious of our cultural heritage, spiritual ethos and constitutional obligations which enjoin us to extend equal treatment to all religious, linguistic and ethnic groups in our country.

NST: Since coming to power, the BJP has suffered from a series of political crises involving component members of the coalition. Some of them could still "jump ship", and bring about another vote of no-confidence.

Is this healthy for the nation? What are the prospects of the Congress Party returning to power?

PM: The National Democratic Alliance government is committed to a common programme which reconciles the diverse regional, political and economic interests of its con-

stituent parties. I believe this is a healthy advance over a political culture based on a single party majority, which may not be quite as responsive to the various shades of minority opinion in the country. It is important to emphasise that the political stability in the country has never been in the question,

even though we have had elections and changes of government more frequently in recent years.

NST: Since India became a full dialogue partner with Asean in 1996, several initiatives like the Asean-India Joint Co-operation Committee and Asean-India Senior Officials Meeting have been established.

How does India view the future of Asean-India relations?

PM: India greatly values its cordial relations with Asean and its member countries. We have a common interest in promoting a multipolar world. We have similar concerns about the impact of the globalisation process on the developing countries. India-Asean linkages are an important element in South-South co-operation. We share Asean's vision of prosperity through expanded regional integration. We believe that countries of Asean and India have some natural synergies, which can be developed into closer political and economic co-operation. Our participation in

to strengthen co-operation with China in bilateral and in international affairs. We also agreed that, as neighbours, we have to solve all problems in a reasonable manner to the satisfaction of both parties.

various Asean fora has been fruitful and mutually beneficial, and we look forward to expanding and deepening this dialogue in every possible way.

NST: India is a full dialogue partner of Asean and participant in the Asean Regional Forum. Pakistan is only a sectoral dialogue partner of Asean but wants to be upgraded. It has also applied to join the ARF. Malaysia feels that a strong case can be made to include Pakistan in the ARF.

Will India be positive if discussions on Pakistan's application to join ARF are linked to discussions on having an Asean+India Summit?

PM: The ARF has taken a consensual decision that the forum should first be consolidated before any further expansion is considered. There is no connection between this and India's multi-faceted relations with Asean as a grouping, and with individual countries of the region.

NST: Pakistan is not a member of the Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Co-operation although it is also an Indian Ocean rim country.

What are your views on Pakistan joining the association?

PM: India believes that the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IOR-ARC) has great potential for closer economic integration among its member countries. We feel that the association should concentrate on areas of promise in economic co-operation, instead of getting bogged down in procedural matters. On the membership issue, I would only like to say that any aspirant should fulfil all the criteria identified by the existing members as necessary for

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furthering the objectives of the association.

NST: On the reforms of the Security Council of the United Nations, there have been calls to increase the number of permanent seats. If Asia gets another permanent seat, would India consider itself a natural choice for it?

PM: India has long been campaigning for reform of the United Nations system and, in particular, of the UN Security Council to make it more representative and more reflective of current world realities. Permanent membership of the Security Council should not be based on regional representation, but on objective criteria such as size, population, international standing, economic strength, participation in UN activities like peacekeeping, and a harmonious balance between developed and developing countries on the Council. We believe that India has strong credentials for permanent membership, which have been acknowledged by countries in Asia and in other continents.
