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Cuba seeks closer ties (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Fri. - Cuba hopes to work closely with Malaysia in agriculture, medicine and research and shares the view that both countries have a need to contribute towards the enhancement of the Group of 77 (G-77).

Visiting Cuban President Fidel Castro, who conveyed this wish during talks with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today, also wants Malaysian businessmen to invest and play a bigger role in the tourism sector there.

Later, speaking at a public lecture, Castro described Malaysia as the only other country (apart from Cuba) which had been rebellious, but still managed to hold its own against overwhelming international pressure.

"It is a rational country," he added.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said the meeting between the two leaders was very successful and said it would contribute towards the enhancement of bilateral relations as well as closer co-operation in the G-77.

"Talks were very friendly and warm, like between friends," he said when briefing reporters on the outcome of the one-hour meeting.

This is Castro's first to Malaysia since assuming leadership 43 years ago. He will be here till Sunday with a 201-member delegation.

Malaysia and Cuba are members of the G-77, an organisation formed in 1964 that groups nearly 100 developing and third world countries.

To mark Castro's visit, Cuba and Malaysia signed an economic, technical and scientific agreement.

The agreement will provide the necessary framework for both countries to focus on the areas that could be worked together.

"Add to the other agreements signed before, there is a seriousness that we want to move further from what we are currently doing," Syed Hamid said.

He added Malaysia had also agreed to grant Cuba an additional US\$15 million (RM57 million) to buy palm oil under its Oil Palm Credit Scheme.

Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, at a state banquet for Castro at Istana Negara tonight, said developing countries should further strengthen negotiations and cooperation among themselves to face the challenges of globalisation.

While developing nations had no intention to pick a quarrel with developed countries, they did not want to see greater polarisation between countries of the North and South, he said.

Dr Mahathir and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi were present.

An official welcoming ceremony was held at Dataran Parlimen this morning graced by the King.

At the public lecture on "Globalisation and International Situation" Castro also referred to Malaysia's unorthodox financial methods that were formulated and successfully proven.

"We are indeed very grateful and have much admiration for Malaysia and its leader for having been able to recover best from the situation.

"You think it (the recovery) was by chance? No!" he noted, adding that Malaysia simply succeeded because it understood the actual scenario and decided to rebel against the unfair financial and economic system imposed by the West.

"I hope that Latin American countries will look and learn from Malaysia,

particularly the nation's rebellious spirit in voicing out the many injustices that apply only to the poor and developing nations," he added.

During the three-hour lecture and interactive session with the participants, Castro pointed out that Malaysia was one of the very few, if not the only, country in the world which had developed in such a rapid pace that it was almost unbelievable.

Touching on the current world scenario, especially on trade issues, Castro lambasted the US for its dominant role in deciding what was right and wrong for other nations.

He said poorer and developing nations would not be able to enjoy or experience democracy and human rights for as long as the developed nations themselves paid no heed to those issues.

"They preach about the international court of justice and human rights issues.

"But how can there be justice and human rights when the advocates themselves abuse human rights, justice and democracy according to their own whims and fancies?"