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Looking forward to enhancing ties

INDIAN Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was to have visited Malaysia from Feb 7-10, 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-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."