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Megawati's visit agenda to reassure Indon neighbours

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THERE is a clear swell of pride among Malaysian-based Indonesian officials sorting out final preparations for the visit of newly elected President Megawati Sukarnoputri.

As the Indonesian delegation lands at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang today, Megawati will lead them for a two-day state visit to Malaysia, and not merely a working visit as earlier planned.

"The Malaysian Government has decided to accord Ibu Mega the honour of a state visit. It's an honour to our president," Indonesian ambassador to Malaysia Hadi Wayarabi Alhadar said.

He told Business Times that the gesture, as decided by the Malaysian Cabinet, shows that Malaysia values its relationship with Indonesia.

On the political front, an important item on the agenda will be Megawati's first closed-door meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad since she was appointed the Indonesian President in late July.

Indonesian officials are expecting that the first eye-to-eye meeting with the Malaysian leader will lead to more meetings in future, a practice between Mahathir and past Indonesian leaders.

"The two leaders will be able to meet and get to know each other. It will also help lay the foundation for strengthening future contacts," he said.

He notes that the two leaders may decide to meet every six months as has been the practice between Mahathir and Megawati's predecessors.

Asked what will be the most important outcome from the visit, Hadi Wayarabi said that it would allow the new Indonesian Cabinet minister to discuss pressing issues with their Malaysian counter-parts.

"They will be able to raise new ideas to issues faced by both sides," he said.

Both neighbouring countries have been faced with a number of problems, including the contentious issue of immigrant workers and the haze originating from forest fires in the Indonesian islands.

"In general, Ibu Mega will explain her Cabinet's problems. She will stress on some of her programmes in the fields of economics, development, law and order, and human rights," he said.

Laying the foundation for future working relationships will be an integral part of Megawati's hectic visits to eight Asean countries.

Kuala Lumpur will be the last-stop in her whirlwind tour that began in the Philippines and which was followed by Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Brunei and Singapore.

It comes hot on the heels of her election as the president by the country's highest legislative body in late-July; replacing Indonesia's first democratically-elected leader, Abdurrahman Abdul Wahid.

Observers see another important arena that may benefit in the coming months; which is peace returning to a region that had been dodged by political uncertainties.

The uncertainties, coupled with regional economic worries due to a slowdown in the US and Japan, have seen Indonesia nursing its wounds of previous excesses.

In the case of Malaysia, investment flows to Indonesia have stagnated of late following uncertainties in the republic. Hadi Wayarabi said one of the reasons is the land status issues that are unclear among Malaysian

investors.

He said however, that Indonesia is hoping to see a turnaround on the investment scene with the introduction of new laws and also the establishment of the fresh Government line-up under Megawati.

He said that a number of new laws recently enacted in Indonesia will assist in sending a positive message to potential foreign investors.

"Gradually, I think this will be resolved. We will see investors and companies coming back again, including those from Malaysia as well," he said.

Observers said that high on the agenda of Megawati's visit through South-East Asia was to drum up investment and business and reassure the region that her vast country was on the mend.

Diplomats have said the regional tour is partly aimed at displaying her confidence in weathering troubles at home, following her sudden ascent to the presidency last month.

The appointment brings an end to a protracted battle of nerves in the country involving threats of emergency, wrangling among the various political factions and the ever-present threat of a military coup.

She steps into the shoes of her late father, President Sukarno, who played an instrumental role in securing Indonesia's independence from the Dutch in 1949. Later, he went on to assume dictatorial powers and was ultimately removed from power in a coup by General Suharto.

Megawati, who was only two years old when Indonesia obtained independence, is today seeking to steer the country forward on the path of democracy and rebuilding a nation that has been torn by an economic crisis.

Her presence in Kuala Lumpur today is a small step towards achieving the bigger picture.

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