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Megawati's visit should cement Indonesia-Malaysia ties

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IT may have been a short stay but the visit of Indonesian Vice-President Megawati Soekarnoputri which ended yesterday has helped to further cement the bilateral ties between the republic and Malaysia.

More significantly, it was her first official visit since assuming the vice-presidency.

Although she has been to Malaysia on private visits, this time she was here with the mandate of President Abdurrahman Wahid.

She made this clear when she told Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi during their one-hour meeting at Putrajaya on Monday that any problems encountered by Malaysian businessmen and investors should be brought to her attention as she was responsible for attracting investments to Indonesia.

The republic, after the 1997 financial crisis which was made worse by ethnic and religious conflicts, badly needs new investments and injection of funds to help expedite its economic recovery.

It has a tough task ahead convincing foreign investors, and Megawati is trying to make a difference with her visits to several Asean member countries.

During talks with Abdullah, she expressed the desire to see more Malaysian companies investing in her country.

The Deputy Prime Minister assured Megawati of Kuala Lumpur's commitment but stressed on the need for Indonesia to create an attractive business climate and ensure political stability if it wanted to see more Malaysian investors.

He said Malaysia believed in achieving development through economic enhancement and "prosper thy neighbour" policy.

It was wise for Abdullah to emphasise on restoring confidence as no investors - including Malaysian companies - would want to put their money in any country which faces the danger of being torn apart by religious and ethnic strife, and with stability and peace being continuously threatened by demonstrations and riots.

The flow of foreign investments - Malaysia can vouch for this as it has the experience and statistics - depends largely on investor confidence and the host country's stability.

Megawati admitted that economic and political problems were plaguing her country but was quick to assure Kuala Lumpur that steps had been taken to overcome them.

Another issue discussed was Indonesian workers in Malaysia, and the problems they caused especially those who entered Malaysia illegally.

Megawati expressed the hope that more of her countrymen would be taken in. Abdullah responded positively, saying foreign workers in Malaysia were brought in based on the country's needs.

At the same time, he told the visiting Vice-President that Kuala Lumpur was concerned about the hundreds of thousands of Indonesians who had entered the country illegally.

"Indonesia should have a suitable structure to help overcome the problem of illegal workers," Abdullah told Megawati, who not only concurred with the Deputy Prime Minister but promised preventive measures.

He explained that the entry of workers through unauthorised channels not only burdened Malaysia but also exposed them to possible exploitation by unscrupulous people.

Megawati's assurance of assistance augured well for Malaysia-Indonesia relations as the subject of Indonesian workers in Malaysia has always been a delicate issue, especially when it comes to deporting the illegals.

While there is no doubt that their presence, such as in the construction sector, has helped speed up development, they are also the cause of a host of social problems.

Apprehending the illegals, detaining and feeding them, and finally deporting them has been a burden to the Government. Jakarta's assistance to stem the tide would provide the much-needed respite.

Abdurrahman, better known as Gus Dur, has given similar promises during recent talks with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The influx of job-seekers into Malaysia could also be reduced through economic developments as citizens of a prosperous country are unlikely to seek greener pasture elsewhere.

Inroads have also been made on border and logging issues with Megawati agreeing to solve the problems through joint commission meetings.

"We agreed to hold a joint commission meeting next month, and the matters mentioned will be discussed," said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar when briefing reporters on the meeting.

It is hoped the agreement would prevent officials from blaming and accusing each other like what happened last year over claims of illegal logging carried out by Malaysian companies and the detention of Malaysians by Indonesian police.

The war of words were not good for bilateral relations, more so when it involved claims of Malaysian soldiers protecting illegal loggers.

Disagreement over any contentious issues should be ironed out through discussion and negotiation instead of bickering which has the potential of getting out of control.

Megawati, whose trip to Malaysia was at the invitation of Abdullah, has invited the Deputy Prime Minister to visit Indonesia.

A reciprocal visit by the Malaysian leader should be considered by the Deputy Prime Minister's office to ensure the existing good working relationship between both leaders be nurtured further.

It will be a good opportunity to sort out pending issues, besides exploring other areas of co-operation.

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