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Towards stronger trade ties with Japan

Kamarul Yunus in Osaka

OSAKA, Sun: A banner with a welcoming message in several languages hang at the immigration entry point at the Kansai International Airport, here.

Quite a normal thing if the message is in Japanese or English but in Bahasa Malaysia? It is indeed rare to see "Selamat Datang" in a foreign country like Japan.

Perhaps the Japanese authorities had put up the banner, which is in conjunction with the four-day visit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, to make the Malaysian delegation feel more welcome.

The warm gesture underscores the close ties between Malaysia and Osaka, located in the Kansai prefecture, which had long been in existence.

Several major companies from Kansai had been investing in Malaysia for years and their commitments to the country's economic growth are laudable.

Matsushita Electric Co Ltd, for example, is one of the first few companies which set up a factory in Malaysia and now, its products under the brand name National and Panasonic, are widely recognised in Malaysia and internationally.

Other companies in Kansai were invited to invest in Malaysia and this was conveyed by the Prime Minister in his speech at a symposium and panel discussion on Thursday, organised by Mainichi Shimbun, a major Japanese newspaper agency.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir invited the Japanese, including those in the Kansai prefecture, to invest in Malaysia. He said Japan can revive its economy by investing in its Asian neighbours.

"Malaysia and some of the Asian countries view with concern Japan's economic situation. Japan must work together with the Asian countries for the betterment of the world," he had said, reiterating his call for Japan to assist in the setting up of the Asian Monetary Fund to speed up the economic recovery of the Asian economies affected by the economic crisis.

And Kansai should not be too shy to come out with its own ideas and promotions to foster relations with countries of South-East Asia, including Malaysia which is a huge market.

As far as Malaysia is concerned, Dr Mahathir said Kansai is no different from other areas in Japan, in terms of trade and investment.

They (Kansai) may be secondary to Tokyo but it is still considered big, in fact bigger than the economy of some countries in South-East Asia, he had said.

And the target would be the small- and medium-scale industries (SMI) and backyard industries in Kansai.

For instance, Dr Mahathir said, there are about 5,500 backyard industries in Oata in Tokyo and they are now facing problems as their children refuse to work in these industries.

As such, he said, it is best that they (Japanese backyard industry operators) relocate their activities to Malaysia, and set up joint ventures with the Malaysian SMI and backyard operators as can be found in Puchong and Serdang.

"In Malaysia, we have started a vendor system and they (Japanese backyard operators) can assist in outsourcing for the main manufacturers in Malaysia," he had said, at a press conference at the end of his visit to Osaka.

Dr Mahathir, however, expressed his concern over Japan emulating the Western system in toto and disregarding some of its traditional values.

"Changes should be gradual so that they would be less destructive to Japan's economic policy. History had shown that some of the Western ideas, even the good ones, had failed and I am sure Japan would falter if it adopts the Western ideas, including the US policy 100 per cent," he had said.

Furthermore, the Western recipe for the new economy only benefits the rich and powerful, while the poor and developing nations continue to be oppressed. The recent economic crisis was testimony to this.

International organisations such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank are represented only by few countries, which are mostly the rich and powerful. These countries's are not sharing the power with the poor and developing nations and their main concern is to make profits, not help ailing economies.

To counter such a situation, Dr Mahathir has called on Japan to play a leading role to help Asian economies recover from the crisis.

"Japan and Asia must rethink human values. We should lead the way in devising new values and norms where might is not right.

"By spreading the virtues of hard work and discipline among the less developed, we can invest in order to enrich everyone in every country," he had said.

Malaysia-Japan relations received a further boost with the appointment of Takeo Hiranuma as Japan's Minister of Economy, International Trade and Industry.

Takeo, who understands Malaysia very well, is also chairman of the Japan-Malaysia Association and Japan-Malaysia Parliamentary Friendship League.

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