

12/05/2001

Vajpayee's visit will boost ties

Firdaus Abdullah

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - After a three-month "delay" attributed to pressing internal matters, particularly the massive Gujarat earthquake, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee will arrive in Kuala Lumpur on Sunday for a three-day working visit.

The Prime Minister's visit, with an entourage of more than 75 businessmen, is expected to create a new synergy in India-Malaysia relations.

Indian High Commissioner to Malaysia, Veena Sikri, told the New Straits Times yesterday that the visit would be most significant in terms of trade and bilateral relations.

Sikri said that although there had been numerous high level meetings and summits where both Vajpayee and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad have had discussions in the past five years, Vajpayee's visit this time around was more focused and timely.

"This is most significant after Dr Mahathir's visit to India in 1996," she said.

Sikri added that bilateral trade, investments and a host of other vital issues pertaining to joint co-operation between the two nations are expected to take precedence.

Sikri, who has been in Malaysia for the past eight months, believes that both parties could look forward to an enhanced environment in all areas - be it political, social, cultural, education, trade, tourism or the much-talked about information technology.

Admitting that bilateral trade between India and Malaysia could be further enhanced with closer co-operation, Sikri said matters pertaining to large scale joint-venture infrastructure projects and the Indian import tariff on palm oil are expected to be deliberated during the visit.

Bilateral trade between the two nations stood at US\$2.7 billion (RM10.26 billion) last year with the trade balance heavily in favour of Malaysia. Malaysia's main import from India remains in the form of equipment parts and meat products while India mainly imports palm oil and electronic products.

It is envisaged that a closer working relationship would be sought between Malaysian and Indian IT companies, particularly in creating a win-win situation where Malaysians could tap valuable experience and expertise from the Indian software engineering sector, while Indian companies could utilise the vast hardware infrastructure available in Malaysia.

"The Multimedia Super Corridor would be an excellent avenue for Indian IT companies to enhance their presence here as a prelude to their expansion in the Asean region.

"Malaysia has a lot of hardware infrastructure, a lot of expertise in human resource development, agriculture and a host of other vital sectors which could be further explored by Indian companies," Sikri said.

She said human resource development, e-commerce and e-governance in Malaysia have attracted a lot of interest from the Indian Government and the private sector.

"Actually, we have a lot to give and take if we look at ourselves more seriously, particularly in the wake of the economic slowdown experienced in the West ... over the years the level of co-operation has improved but there is much more untapped potential in both countries," she said.

Citing highway and railway construction as examples of existing

development co-operation, Sikri said Indian companies were looking forward to share their expertise in the proposed US\$1.8 billion Ipoh-Padang Besar railroad project while 13 Malaysian companies are already involved in the construction of a massive 10,000 kilometres of highways in India.

"Out of the 27 private companies involved in the massive highway project, 13 are from Malaysia ... I think this alone explains our relationship," she added.

She said the participation of Indian companies in the railroad project was expected to be finalised during Vajpayee's visit.

On the second day of his visit, the Indian Prime Minister is also expected to officiate the Malaysia-India Business Forum.

The Forum has so far drawn a participation of more than 300 companies, both from India and Malaysia.

According to Sikri, the business forum is an important avenue for the private sectors to know each other better and work towards a common goal.

"India has a Look-East policy and for us look-east means South East Asia, we very much like to play a part here and Malaysia could be an excellent host to Indian companies to venture into this region ... with all the available infrastructure.

"Likewise Malaysian companies too should look forward to setting up their operations in India and be an important link for companies from the Asean region to venture into India," Sikri said.

She added that all that was required now was mere awareness and the willingness to work harder on the available potential.

"In Asean, Malaysia is one of the most important countries for India in many aspects ... so we really do look at Malaysia," she said of the Indian Government's policy towards Malaysia.

Apart from information technology which has been closely associated with Indian companies participation in the MSC, co-operation in the Bio-technology field is also expected to be better co-ordinated with private bio-technology development companies from India.

Bio-informatics, bio-technology, vaccine development and ayurvedic medicine are also expected to create much room for closer co-operation between the Indian private sector and Malaysian institutions of higher learning.

A host of memorandums of understanding are also expected to be endorsed during Vajpayee's working visit.

So far the memorandum on Co-operation between the Civil Services, Securities Commissions and the Immigration Departments have been finalised with a few other MoUs in the final process.

The issue of double-taxation is also expected to be solved via the various impending MoUs.

India, with a population of more than 180 million Muslims - the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia, is also expected to present a thinly-veiled proposal seeking entry into the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).

Asked about this possibility, Sikri said, "India has a population of 180 million Muslims, the largest after Indonesia, so it's entirely up to the OIC to consider this".

Sikri added that Vajpayee and Dr Mahathir are expected to touch on various other international issues, particularly recent developments in the region and the world.