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Vajpayee says visit has rejuvenated ties with Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee said his visit to Malaysia which ended yesterday will help rejuvenate relations between the two countries which had become "rather static" in recent years.

His four-day visit was also a reaffirmation of India's Look East policy, with a special focus on countries in the Asean region.

He said this to Indian reporters on board the Air India aircraft en route home to New Delhi.

The Times of India, the country's largest-selling newspaper, quoted Vajpayee as saying the visit had given new impetus to bilateral ties, which had lacked momentum in the last few years.

"Several mechanisms, such as the joint commission and the defence committee, had been set up but till recently, they could not even meet at regular intervals," he was quoted as saying.

He described the visit as important as it took place at a time when there were reports that Malaysia might be favouring tripartite talks on Kashmir.

Vajpayee quoted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as saying that Malaysia had stated it was against all forms of terrorism, including religious terrorism and state-sponsored terrorism.

The Tribune said there had been certain statements from Malaysia in the recent past which created the impression that Malaysia favoured tripartite talks on the Kashmir issue.

It quoted Vajpayee as saying he had informed Dr Mahathir on steps taken to improve relations with Pakistan.

The country even ordered a one-sided ceasefire in Kashmir but to no avail so far.

Vajpayee, the newspaper said, also allayed impressions that his visit to Malaysia had been overshadowed by controversy over the hike in the duty on palm oil imports from Malaysia.

"This was not so. They (Malaysia) have to sell oil and we have to buy oil.

"So where is the problem? We have agreed to review the hike in duty on palm oil imports from Malaysia," he said.

He said the issue of palm oil duty was a small matter compared to the RM5.7 billion (US\$1.5 billion) rail project bagged by India.

The Pioneer quoted Vajpayee as saying his visit was both "upyogi" and "labhdayak" (useful and fruitful).

Vajpayee, it said, had also raised the delay in signing an extradition treaty with Malaysia.

Attributing it to "legal hurdles", Vajpayee said such treaties took time to materialise because of the intricate legal complexities involved.

There was widespread speculation that the treaty might be signed during his visit, leading to the early extradition to India of Ottavio Quattrocchi. He is being sought by India's Central Bureau of Investigation in relation to the Swedish Bofors arms scandal.

The Financial Express, in an analysis, said India should have invited Malaysia for palm oil joint ventures instead of agreeing to review the import duty on the commodity.

On globalisation, the newspapers said, both Malaysia and India shared the same views, apprehensions and anxieties.

A meeting would be held between representatives of the two countries to study the implications of the World Trade Organisation later this year.

The newspaper said this was the right time to strike joint ventures for developing large palm oil estates and inviting liberal foreign direct investment into India.

The Indian Express quoted the Indian Prime Minister as saying that one significant fallout was the agreement between the two countries to cooperate on security issues.

"Though he refused to give details, he said it was a reaffirmation of India's Look East Policy with a special focus on countries in the Asean region," the newspaper said.

The newspapers said Vajpayee had also asked the Indian community here to persuade the Malaysian authorities to build a memorial for Subhash Chandra Bose or Netaji.

"I was surprised Malaysia had no memorial of Netaji. I have told the people of Indian origin there that our Government would extend any kind of help needed for this purpose," he said.

Subhash was the leader of the Indian National Army, which in the 1940s recruited Indians staying outside India, including Malaya, to fight the British in India.

Vajpayee said he had also raised in talks the recent clashes in Kampung Medan involving the Indian community.

However, he was told by Dr Mahathir that the matter was an isolated one and had been resolved.

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