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Way paved for local firms to build ports in Bahrain

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MALAYSIAN firms now have a channel to transfer their port development technology to Bahrain when they participate in the construction of a US\$500 million Port Salman in the Gulf state.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between Malaysia and Bahrain yesterday has paved the way for local companies to participate in Bahrain's new port project.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his visiting counterpart from Bahrain, Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa, witnessed the signing of the MOU.

The signatories for the MOU were Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik who signed on behalf of Malaysia while Bahrain was represented by its Minister of Finance and Economy, Abdullah Hassan Saif.

Another MOU was also signed for the establishment of a joint commission to further enhance bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

This MOU was signed by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar for Malaysia and his counterpart from Bahrain, Shaikh Mohammad bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa.

Briefing reporters after the signing ceremony in Putrajaya, Syed Hamid said Bahrain has invited Malaysian companies to take part in the development of the country's new port.

This was expressed by Shaikh Khalifa during his talks with Dr Mahathir before the signing ceremony.

According to Syed Hamid, local firms have sufficient experience in port development to be involved in Port Salman project.

"However, we don't know which local company will be involved in the project.

"It is between the private sector.. the governments are only supporting their (private sector) initiative, especially through joint ventures," he said.

Syed Hamid said the construction of the port will start soon and Bahrain is very keen to see participation from Malaysian firms in the project.

The minister said Shaikh Khalifa has also invited the national carrier, Malaysia Airlines System Bhd (MAS), to operate in Bahrain.

"He (Shaikh Khalifa) said Bahrain practises open sky policy and the country is prepared to provide the 5th and 6th freedom rights to MAS, where the carrier can pick up passengers in Bahrain for its connecting flights," he said.

He said both leaders have also agreed to achieve effective cooperation in various fields such as trade, industry and finance.

"They had touched on the possibility of setting up a joint venture in industrial sector," he added.

Shaikh Kahlifa also told Dr Mahathir that they have approved Malayan Banking Bhd's application to operate in Bahrain.

Both leaders had discussed at length about Bahrain's suggestion for Malaysia to use the country as a transshipment centre in its trade with the Gulf states.

Bahrain, which has a population of about 600,000 people, could be a gateway for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member nations which have a total population of 20 million people.

The GCC groups Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

On economic cooperation, Syed Hamid said both sides can form joint ventures in services sector as 62 per cent of Bahrain's income comes from such sector.

"Bahrain is very keen to develop its services sector (but) it is really up to the private sector from both sides to identify areas of joint ventures," he said.

Dr Mahathir, meanwhile, has asked Bahrain to send its students to further their studies in Malaysia, especially in multimedia fields.

During the one-hour meeting, the Prime Minister has also explained about the facilities at Multimedia Super Corridor to his Bahrain counterpart.

Syed Hamid said Dr Mahathir has also been invited to visit Bahrain to follow up with the bilateral cooperation between both countries. Dr Mahathir's last visit to Bahrain was in April 1997.

Shaikh Khalifa is leading a 55-member delegation, including four ministers, on a three-day official visit starting yesterday.

Bilateral trade between Malaysia and Bahrain in 1998 stood at RM210.3 million in favour of Malaysia.

Malaysia's exports to Bahrain reached RM132.7 million in 1998, the bulk of it being palm oil, wood products, furniture, veneers, plywood, paper and paper products.

The country's imports from Bahrain amounted to RM77.6 million involve aluminium, iron ore and concentrates, manufactured base metal and articles of plastics.

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