

■ By K. PARKARAN

KUALA LUMUR: Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will lead a 160-member delegation comprising several cabinet ministers, government officials and businessmen on a week-long visit to Morocco, Libya and Bahrain beginning tomorrow.

The Prime Minister, whose itinerary is packed with several bilateral meetings, dialogues and luncheon talks, will be in Morocco for an official visit from April 15-18 and in Libya from April 18-20.

Dr Mahathir, who will be accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Ah. winds up the three-nation visit with a working visit to Bahrain from April 20-21.

The Cabinet Ministers, who will be in the delegation are Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu; International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz; Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar; Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Nazri Abdul Aziz; and Family and Women Development Minister Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil.

Arab-Malaysian Bank Bhd chairman Tan Sri Azman Hashim will lead the 64-member business delegation.

Wisma Putra said in a statement that the government attached importance to the trip as it believed it would further strengthen bilateral relations and economic cooperation between Malaysia and the three countries.

The thrust of Dr Mahathir's visit is expected to be on ways

to enhance trade and economic ties, where at the moment there is plenty of room for improvement between Malaysia and the three Islamic countries.

"While opening up more two-way business opportunities appears to be the thrust of the Prime Minister's visit based on the number of leading entrepreneurs in his entourage, bilateral talks will also feature prominently," an aide to the Prime Minister said yesterday.

Other important areas of discussion during Dr Mahathir's meetings with government heads and leaders will centre on terrorism and the current Israel-Palestine conflict.

The highlight of his visit is expected to be his meeting on Thursday with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Dr Mahathir will be meeting Gaddafi on Libyan soil for the first time. The two leaders have met on the sidelines during the Non-Aligned Movement and Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) summits in the past.

"This is going to be different in view of what has happened to the Islamic world after the Sept 11 attacks. They are expected to exchange views on battling terrorism and forging Islamic unity," said the aide.

While in Morocco, Dr Mahathir will have an audience with King Mohammed VI, who was installed as head of state two years ago after his father's death, in the capital city of Rabat.

He will also meet his Moroccan counterpart Abderrahmane Youssouffi and have

an informal gathering with Malaysian students.

Dr Mahathir will then hold a dialogue with Moroccan Islamic Intellectuals, Think Tanks and Parliamentarians on Tuesday.

In Casablanca the following day, the Prime Minister will meet the Moroccan business community and visit the national car assembly plant and the technopark.

Dr Mahathir and his entourage will head for Tripoli, Libya on Thursday, where he will meet Gaddafi shortly after arrival. He will then lead the Malaysian government delegation for a bilateral meeting with Libyan officials led by their Prime Minister Imbarak Abdalla Al-Samekh.

Dr Mahathir will visit the renowned Great Man-Made River Project in Benghazi on Friday before performing Friday prayers at the Benghazi Mosque with locals. He will later meet Libyan businessmen and several business and trade agreements and memoranda of understanding are expected to be signed.

The delegation will arrive in Manama, the capital city of Bahrain, on Saturday where Dr Mahathir will hold an audience with King Sheikh Khalifa Bin Salman Al-Khalifa.

Besides meeting businessmen and holding bilateral talks, Dr Mahathir will open the Petronas office in Manama and deliver a keynote address on "The Power of Knowledge in the New Era" at the 31st International Federation for Training and Development World Conference.