

Dr Mahathir finds Gaddafi more open, more receptive

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The politics well in place, Malaysian businessmen should now move quickly to seek a stronger foothold in Morocco, Libya and Bahrain. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has once again shown the way forward during his recent trip to these three countries (April 15 to 21), reports AHMAD A. TALIB

IT was way past midnight and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had not yet returned to the Al-Kabir hotel from his "assignment". Cabinet Ministers and their State colleagues who had accompanied the Prime Minister on his visit to Libya were still up and about waiting for the Prime Minister's return.

They waited in the hotel lobby, wondering how much longer they would have to.

More importantly, they wanted to know what instructions would be coming their way from their boss who had been whisked away after an official dinner to yet another, this time with his host — Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan President.

For the record, this was Dr Mahathir's third meeting with Gaddafi during his three-days/two-nights stay on Libyan soil.

Those well acquainted with Libyan politics, particularly with Gaddafi's preference for secretive movements and schedules, know that a third meeting in such a short time is not only extraordinary but significant as well.

Dr Mahathir's first meeting was a courtesy call made soon after his arrival on April 18.

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At a Press conference on board flight NH-1802 as the delegation made its way to Bahrain for the last leg of the three-nation tour, Dr Mahathir said:

"Libya is really keen to learn from us... Gaddafi has so many questions.

"He's particularly anxious to know how we manage our economy, ward off our currency attackers and live harmoniously in a society such as ours. He's a different person now compared to what he was before — he's more open, more receptive to ideas on developing his country.

"He is beginning to understand and accept that peace and harmony are necessary for national development."

Gaddafi may be feeling a sense of apprehension in constructive engagement with foreign powers, but the need for foreign investments and international goodwill may eventually help to place Libya in a more friendly environment.

Some of that understanding could have been triggered by Gaddafi's grilling of the Prime Minister which Dr Mahathir seemed not to mind at all.

This was followed by a private dinner the same night.

That first meeting with Gaddafi was made known to the delegation only minutes after the brand new Malaysia Airlines B777 touched down.

The journey from the Mitiga military airport to Gaddafi's quarters was a short drive (about 20 minutes) to the President's walled headquarters (one of several, local officers said).

The motorcade passed through several "No Entry" signs and through several checkpoints manned by well-armed soldiers and guards.

Once inside the main compound, only Dr Mahathir, the accompanying Cabinet Ministers, their State colleagues from Penang, Pahang and Johor and a few more senior officials were allowed into a tent where discussions were held.

Speaking through an interpreter, Gaddafi briefed Dr Mahathir on Libya's push into global economic activities, which was hampered by the sanctions imposed in 1992 by the United Nations and lifted only in 1999. (Libya was implicated in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.)

It was obvious from the discussions that the Libyan leader was "a man in a hurry".

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Gaddafi must have heard much about Dr Mahathir's views on world issues, Islamic matters, his feelings about the ongoing Palestinian conflict and his call for global economic reforms, which explained why the Libyan leader found his three meetings with the Prime Minister an integral part of his learning curve.

It appears Gaddafi can expect economic and social lessons via a crash correspondence course in the coming weeks.

Libya and Malaysia also initialled several agreements aimed at further strengthening economic relations. The signing was done at about lam, immediately after Dr Mahathir concluded his third discussion with Gaddafi.

It was obvious to every member of Great Man-Made River described by the delegation that the repeated encounters between Dr Mahathir and Wonder of the World, Gaddafi were the highlight of the visit, overshadowing even the visit to the

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Malaysia also signed agreements with Morocco (the delegation was in Rabat and Casablanca from April 15 to 18), and Dr Mahathir officially opened the Petronas office in Manama, Bahrain, besides laying the foundation stone for the Malaysian trade centre in the oil-rich gulf state.

Though the trip was short and its schedules tight, it was an obvious success. It is now up to the private sector to capitalise on Malaysia's good name and participate in the proven enrich-thy-neighbour policy of recent years. That, or expand on the excuses and shy away from what could be profitable business ventures.

In all the countries, the delegation was warmly received. The business delegation had separate meetings but the immediate link-ups are not possible to see from one visit.

What is feared is that some of the businessmen used the trip to project themselves as being close to the power centre and went on the trip for that sole purpose.

One could only hope that several

accompanying *Wakil Rakyat* picked up a few tips from the trip, especially in seeing international diplomacy at work at close range.

Of the three countries, Bahrain

was the most developed (the financial centre for the Gulf for many years). Morocco and Libya have good roads and amenities. Morocco was more touristy (especially Casa-

blanca) while one sensed an awakening in the people of Tripoli and Benghazi.

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