

PM begins visit to Myanmar today

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YANGON: The two-day visit by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Myanmar, which begins here today, is significant in the wake of events that took place after opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was freed from 19 months of house arrest on May 6.

Her release was made after months of crucial "confidence-building talks" between the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and Suu Kyi.

Tan Sri Razali Ismail, the United Nations' special envoy to Myanmar and special adviser to the Prime Minister, played a major role in brokering the negotiations.

Among the major changes that had taken places was the freeing of 14 political dissidents.

It has been reported that Suu Kyi had asked to meet Dr Mahathir during his visit here. However, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said on Friday that she had not made a formal request, adding that it would be for Myanmar to decide on any meeting.

The Prime Minister's brief working trip, his fourth to the country since 1988, is aimed at strengthening bilateral relations, trade and investment, and to reciprocate a visit to Malaysia last September by Myanmar leader Senior General Than Shwe.

Malaysian ambassador to Myanmar, Datuk Cheah Sam Kip, described bilateral ties between the countries as "excellent and free of contentious issues."

Thirty-two projects, valued at US\$642mil (RM2.44bil), have been initiated by Malaysian

firms in Myanmar and 16 have already been executed. They involve the manufacturing, oil and gas exploration, tourism, and real estate sectors.

The US\$642mil does not include \$US500mil (RM1.9bil) that Petronas has invested in oil and gas exploration.

Petronas is expected to sign another agreement to endorse four more production sharing contracts.

"There has been increasing interest in investment opportunities in the country, as Myanmar continues to open up its economy," Cheah said when briefing Malaysian journalists yesterday.

Malaysia is now the fourth largest foreign investor in the country after Singapore, Britain and Thailand.

While Malaysian officials have side-stepped all issues pertaining to politics, focussing

only on trade and bilateral matters, diplomatic circles here regard the timing of Dr Mahathir's visit as "significant", noting that many events had taken place after Suu Kyi's release.

Dr Mahathir's busy schedule today will begin with a call on Gen. Than Shwe and a state banquet.

Tomorrow, he is scheduled to address the Malaysia-Myanmar technology conference, jointly organised by the Malaysian Industry Government Group for High Technology (Might) and the SPDC.

The Prime Minister will also witness the signing of agreements and memorandum of understanding, and witness the handing over of a smart school laboratory project before visiting the Myanmar Information and Communications Technology (MICT) Park.