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Terrorism to take centrestage at talks between Dr M and German leaders

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - The Prime Minister's visit to Germany tomorrow will serve to strengthen the good relations between Malaysia and the republic.

Both countries are expected to discuss terrorism, a subject expected to take centrestage at talks between Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and German leaders, including Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

German Ambassador to Malaysia Juergen A.R. Staks said ties between Malaysia and Germany could be described as excellent, growing, substantive and friendly.

"As such, it is about time Dr Mahathir came to Germany. We welcome his visit as we consider each other as good partners especially in trade, investment and economy," he said in an interview here.

Staks said he expected the topic on terrorism to feature prominently during the talks.

After Sept 11, he said terrorism, along with Afghanistan and the escalating conflict in the Middle East, had become the most important topics of discussion.

"We consider Malaysia a moderate Islamic nation with good ties with the Islamic world.

"We want to take advantage of these connections. We want to get your advice on how to approach a particular (Islamic) country, Government or event."

Dr Mahathir is expected to brief German leaders on Malaysia's stand and that of the Islamic world's, especially the mistake of labelling all Muslims as terrorists.

Staks said Dr Mahathir's message would help foster mutual understanding and make Germans understand the role of Islam in society.

Germany has some 600,000 Muslims, most of whom live in Cologne and Berlin.

Staks said he was pleased with the progress of the integration programme in his country, with mutual understanding and tolerance being "much, much better".

He added that Germany was working on programmes to continuously develop understanding on both sides.

"Children go to the same schools as non-Muslims. We are trying to put across the message that we have to respect each other's religion and try to develop a lifestyle which makes it easy for us to live with one another."

Staks said the talks would also include the social, scientific and educational ties between both countries.

"We have recently concluded an agreement with Universiti Teknologi Mara and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

"In December last year, I gave a work party for 38 Malaysians, all UiTM students who are undergoing a two-year training programme in Germany. This co-operation is based on a memorandum of understanding with UiTM.

"Of the 38 students, 20 have never been outside of Malaysia. I consider them courageous as they were going into the winter cold and a new environment and culture," he said, adding that the programme had been very successful.

Staks said there were also plans to forge Internet connections between German high schools and their counterparts in Malaysia.

"Students do not have to pay fees in German universities. Some

universities have developed programmes for English-speaking students."

Staks said Germany had a success story of sorts in Malaysia including the German-Malaysian Institute which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year.

He said the two countries could also co-operate in science, and that German companies were particularly interested in the Multimedia Super Corridor.

"There are many small- and medium-scale industries in Germany that are active in what the MSC is dealing with. It would, therefore, be a real pity if we could not share our expertise with Malaysia."

Staks said Germany is the number one European Union country in Malaysia in terms of investment.

"There are many German companies in Johor, Penang, Kuantan and Kuala Lumpur. BASF, a major German chemical plant, has plans to expand its operations in Malaysia."

He said Germany would also look into the possibility of assembling cars here.

"We're looking for a country with natural resources, a well-functioning infrastructure and a well-developed and skilled labour force. Malaysia has all these."

On tourism, Staks said Malaysia should carry out more intensive campaigns aimed at Germans.

"Some 70,000 Germans visit Malaysia annually... this figure could be more. I have personally campaigned among friends and relatives. I told them the hotel rates are cheap and the highways perfect. One can go anywhere."

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