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Bush rolls out welcome mat for Mahathir

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WASHINGTON DC: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Washington, at the invitation of President George W. Bush, is being closely watched by politicians, the international entrepreneurs, American and Malaysian businesses.

The business communities of Malaysia and the US expect stronger business relations following the meeting between the two leaders at the White House today.

They expect greater trade and investments and stepped up relations in other areas including cultural, political and defence.

The US Ambassador to Malaysia, Marie Huhtala, also told Reuters that Malaysian firms could expect to gain from the meeting. But it is not a one-way street.

Even the American businesses and entrepreneurs can expect to benefit from greater trade and investment.

Currently the trade and business flows between the two countries are quite substantial. Malaysia is the US' 11th largest trading partner and the 17th largest export market. Last year exports to the US accounted for US\$17.9 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80) while imports from the US to Malaysia stood at US\$11.8 billion.

Malaysia is a major destination for American exports as it sells more to Malaysians than it does to Russians, Indians and Indonesians combined.

Malaysia, a developing country, is the 18th largest trading nation in the world and a gateway for the American business community to compete in Asia.

Its trade as a percentage to gross national product at some 120 per cent is higher than most developed countries including the US and Japan.

Malaysia's economic progress and development and its increased purchasing power have resulted in American companies seeking out the lucrative market in this developing country.

Malaysia's policy of development and enriching its neighbours also serves as a win-win situation for all its trading partners. It is evident, among others, in the increased trade with the US.

America continues to be Malaysia's largest foreign direct investor with US\$2.9 billion invested in Malaysia up till October 1 last year. US businesses have invested up to US\$20 billion in Malaysia, one of the world's biggest sub-contractors of semiconductors and personal computer circuit boards.

As the standard of living in Malaysia improves, its population continues to demand and consume an increasing volume of foreign goods. This benefits producers and exporters of goods and services in exporting countries which helps create jobs in the exporting country.

Thus there is much hope pinned on the prospects of the Malaysian economy. The Americans are no less anxious for improved bilateral relations as the potential for business is great. The bilateral trade is currently in Malaysia's favour of US\$6 billion. "American businesses here have a great feeling of confidence that good opportunities will come out of the meeting between our President George Bush and Prime Minister Dr Mahathir," Nicholas Zeffery's of the American Malaysian Chamber was reported as saying.

The invitation to Dr Mahathir from President Bush is viewed as "significant" and "very important" for the US "to say thank you to a

respected leader for a very stirring response in a global campaign against terror".

The US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, James Kelly, stressed the importance for the two leaders "to communicate in a direct and honest way". The two - Dr Mahathir and Bush - met on the sidelines of the Apec meeting in Shanghai last year.

But there is much more than just saying "thank you". The direct communication between the leader of the world's largest and most powerful nation and that of a moderate, Islamic country is significant from an international perspective in the "war against terror". In the post September 11 scenario, it is important for a better understanding of the concerns, worries and thinking of Islamic nations.

Malaysia, an Islamic country, is seen as a "beacon of stability in the region". Malaysia's policies and approaches in dealing with communists and terrorist elements have been viewed as "positive and helpful".

There are lessons for others from Malaysia in dealing with these elements. Dr Mahathir has said that it is important to win the hearts and minds of the people as Kuala Lumpur did with the communists. It takes time but it is a better solution than killing innocent civilians.

Dr Mahathir has not been afraid to speak his mind and has not stopped from doing so following the September 11 attacks in the US. The US actions and its military attack in Afghanistan in the name of wiping out terrorism and the Taliban have been criticised. During the meeting with Bush, the Prime Minister is expected to say what he has to say bluntly and clearly - the only way he knows how.

Malaysia's ways and approach in dealing with issues, terrorists and crisis certainly differ from those of the US and other Western developed countries, but the success of its approach - in dealing with the communists and terrorists as well as the economic crisis - shows that alternatives approaches are available and should be tried. There is more than one road that leads to Rome. The results are self-evident.

In the current world situation where "terrorism and terrorists" are equated with Muslims and Islam, it is important for the West, and especially the US, to understand Islam and the thinking of Muslims.

In this respect, Dr Mahathir has the best credentials. He is not only looked upon as the leader of the Islamic world but also a moderate voice for a religion and its followers who are very much misunderstood and maligned.

Dr Mahathir, who is set to take over the chairmanship of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) and of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), will have a wider reach and influence in the coming months. It makes sense for US to seek cooperation from members of the two organisations.

Kuala Lumpur has worked closely with the US to combat terrorism - exchanging key information and intelligence. Washington with its on-going "global campaign against terror" is expected to boost cooperation with Malaysia in fighting terrorism.

Dr Mahathir's visit to the White House will certainly spur positive business sentiment for mutual benefit. While terrorism and how to deal with it will be high on the agenda, other bilateral, regional and international issues are also expected to be raised.

The two leaders, who met on the sidelines of the Apec meeting in Shanghai last year, got long well "having developed a feeling of being able to communicate with each other". Their meeting today is a major step forward in bilateral ties and sets the stage for a new era in Malaysia-US relations.

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