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Malaysia-Japan (News Analysis)

DR MAHATHIR'S TRIP TO JAPAN SUBSTANTIAL

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TOKYO, May 23 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's just-ended working visit to Japan was substantial for having extracted Tokyo's support for the Asean plus three (Asean+3) secretariat to be set up in Malaysia.

The secretariat would be a prelude to the formation of the East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG).

The EAEG's potential members who include the 10 Asean members as well as China, Japan and South Korea would be a culmination of Kuala Lumpur's perseverance in having a platform for East Asia to discuss common issues.

It is heartwarming therefore to be assured of Japan's support in regional initiatives such as the Asean+3, the EAEG, as well as efforts to take bilateral ties to a significantly higher plane.

Having embraced the Look East Policy for the past 20 years, Malaysia continues to enjoy a strong partnership with Japan as evidenced by the substantial ground covered during Dr Mahathir's visit.

At the end of the three-day visit which included a meeting with his counterpart, Junichiro Koizumi, Tokyo gave Malaysia a warm and genuine assurance that it would continue to assist its long-time friend.

Parliamentarians from the Japan-Malaysia Parliamentarians' Friendship League who met Dr Mahathir echoed similar sentiments.

Dr Mahathir was on a working visit to Japan from May 20-22.

His packed schedule here included a keynote address at a conference and other private meetings which brought up issues on broadening regional perspectives such as East Asia's economic development, the emergence of China as an economic superpower, as well as bilateral issues involving soft loans and assistance in scientific and technological development.

Dr Mahathir's visit was given wide coverage in the local media and the Japan Times daily dated May 23 reported that Koizumi, Dr Mahathir and the Philippines president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, as having agreed to address issues pertaining to East Asian development.

Quoting Japanese government officials, the daily said all three leaders had agreed to hold a cabinet-level meeting in Tokyo this summer to discuss East Asian development as part of broad cooperative measures between Japan and Southeast Asia.

The so-called East Asia development initiative is a forum to discuss overall development policies for the region and to cooperate in helping less-developed countries.

Koizumi pitched the idea during his visit to five Southeast Asian nations in January, the daily added.

As for the Nikkei Conference, which focused on China, Dr Mahathir received thunderous applause before and after his keynote address on "China - A Challenge or an Opportunity for Asean?"

The moderator Hirotsugu Koike, senior editor/foreign news Editor of Nikkei said a famous leader needed no introduction and dubbed Dr Mahathir as "The Opinion Leader of Asia" and "The Opinion leader of the 3rd World" to the applause of the audience.

In his speech, the Prime Minister deliberated on both the challenges and opportunities brought about by China and that it should be treated as an economic superpower and not as an enemy that could flex its military muscle.

The question-and-answer session that followed his speech saw an

impressed Japanese student who had studied in Malaysia calling Dr Mahathir a great leader.

He had asked for Dr Mahathir's comments on the disadvantages of frequent changes to the leadership in a particular country.

To this, the Prime Minister said, "If my term of office is two years, you may not know me."

Having been long there, he said, he was able to make corrections, make plans and produce results.

He said one should try to give a least able person a chance to have a go.

"If you stop him, in the first year when he is trying to learn his job, or in the second when he starts planning or he's out in the third, then you don't know if he's good or bad," the Prime Minister said.

The bilateral issues brought up during this visit also covered soft loans, for which Japan was currently conducting an environmental assessment for a project to supply water from Pahang to Selangor.

The Prime Minister's keen interest in technology and the need to see the country progress in this field, saw him engaged in discussions on the concept of "bio-valley" with Dr Kisho Kurohawa, (the architect for the KLIA) along with other academics from various universities.

The "bio-valley," a long-term project, would involve the setting up of research units and needed the expertise of Japanese scientists to train Malaysia's own scientists.

Another sharing area on technology with Japan was in the construction of "Puteri Intan Satu," a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) tanker owned by the Malaysian International Shipping Corporation Bhd (MISC) at the Koyagi plant of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd (MHI) Nagasaki shipyard.

It was reported that their first tanker, out of six ordered by MISC, had 30 per cent Malaysian content.

This is in the form of the vessel's cargo tanker insulation boxes manufactured in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, which are specialised components of the LNG tanks.

Dr Mahathir said although this constituted a small percentage of the total content of the tanker, the experience gained from this project would bring about far reaching benefits for Malaysia, especially in encouraging local development capabilities.

Like most of his previous trips abroad, the trip to Japan has and would continue to bring about tangible and mutually rewarding benefits for both Malaysia and Japan.

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