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MAHATHIR-SWITZERLAND

DR MAHATHIR'S SWITZERLAND VISIT BOOSTS BILATERAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS

By: Manik Mehta

ZURICH, June 18 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recent visit to Switzerland has intensified ties between Malaysia and the European country.

Analysts in Switzerland nevertheless said topical issues such as fighting international terrorism, the West Asia situation, the architecture of the international financial system and globalisation also figured in talks with his Swiss interlocutors. This was the first-ever visit by a Malaysian head of government to Switzerland.

In his discussions with various interlocutors, including the Swiss President Kaspar Villiger and the Economic and Foreign Ministers Joseph Deiss and Pascal Couchepin respectively, Dr Mahathir underscored the significance of greater economic interaction between Malaysia and Switzerland and highlighted the need to tap the business potential inherent in trade and investments.

Malaysia has been running an adverse balance of trade with Switzerland. The Prime Minister urged Switzerland to open up its market and buy more Malaysian products. Switzerland's exports to Malaysia in 2001 amounted to some 553 million Swiss francs while its imports from Malaysia were of the order of only 241 million Swiss francs.

The Swiss are also providing assistance to Malaysia under their development aid programme.

The Swiss are helping Malaysia under a project sponsored by the International Tropical Timber Organization in the state of Sarawak as well as in a project in the field of vocational training.

The Malaysian side has also expressed its appreciation of the cooperation forthcoming from the Swiss in the case of the Malaysian steel group Perwaja.

The Swiss are also pleased that Malaysia has decided to re-open its embassy in the Swiss capital Bern; the Malaysian side said that the embassy could be opened latest by next year.

The embassy which functioned until 1992, was closed down because of financial constraints. Malaysia has been represented since 1992 by a consulate in Zurich and its permanent mission to the United Nations in Geneva.

"The re-establishment of the embassy in Bern would increase diplomatic interaction between the two countries and also have a positive impact on the development of bilateral economic relations," an official of the Department for External Relations (the Swiss foreign office) told Bernama.

The Swiss have another reason to cultivate good relations with Malaysia. The Swiss believe that Malaysia because of its prominent role in the Islamic world, could play an important part in the global efforts to contain and eradicate international terrorism as witnessed by the world in recent times. Indeed, the Swiss President Villiger was conspicuously emphasizing Dr Mahathir's "important role as a Moslem leader and statesman" in the global fight against terrorism. Villiger also praised the Malaysian Prime Minister's "critical and innovative spirit".

One question that persistently lingers in relations between the two sides is the fate of Bruno Manser, the Swiss environmentalist, who disappeared in Borneo. While many of Manser's supporters in Switzerland fear he may have been killed, Malaysia's assurance that it would do everything to track down Manser seemed to have had a positive effect on the

Swiss.

The Bruno-Manser-Fund would like the Malaysian Government to also locate Manser's diaries which contained valuable information. Some of Manser's personal belongings were handed over to the Swiss. -- BERNAMA

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