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Mahathir-Visit

DR MAHATHIR'S VISIT TO MOROCCO, LIBYA, BAHRAIN WILL BENEFIT ALL

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KUALA LUMPUR, April 13 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's current excellent relations with Morocco, Libya and Bahrain will move to an even higher plateau with the visit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the three countries next week.

The week-long tour, beginning on April 15 will boost Malaysia's ties with the three Islamic countries, said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

"The intention is to enhance bilateral relations and see what areas of economic cooperation that can be strengthened with these countries," he said recently.

Infact, it is a timely trip, with Muslims around the world forging closer ties in the aftermath of the Sept 11 attacks on the United States.

Dr Mahathir's visit to Morocco and Bahrain is to reciprocate that of his counterparts to Malaysia while his trip to Libya is at the invitation of its leader, Muammar Gaddafi.

Economic-wise, Morocco offers the perfect launch pad to enter the European Union market given its close proximity to Spain, while Bahrain is well positioned for Malaysian goods to penetrate the lucrative West Asian market.

As for Libya, apart from the notable presence of Petronas through a concession in the Libyan-Tunisian border, a strong effort by Malaysian companies to take advantage of the United Nations lifting of its sanctions in 1999 has yet to be fruitful.

Apart from meeting his counterparts, Dr Mahathir's trip would see him addressing industrialists, intellectuals and politicians of the North African states of Morocco and Libya and the Persian Gulf state of Bahrain.

In Libya, Dr Mahathir will pay a courtesy call on Gaddafi and meet with his Libyan counterpart Mubarak Abdallah Al-Shamekh. He will also address the Libyan business community at a business dinner in Tripoli, according to a Wisma Putra statement issued today.

In Bahrain, the prime minister will deliver a keynote address to corporate and business leaders on the theme "The Power of Knowledge in the New Era" at the 31st international Federation for Training and Development (IFTDO) World Conference.

Dr Mahathir will also preside at the ground breaking ceremony for the Malaysian Trade and Exhibition Centre in Manama and open the Petronas Bahrain office.

He will also witness the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the governments of Malaysia and Bahrain on technical assistance and infrastructure and a joint venture agreement between the private sectors of both countries.

Moroccan Ambassador to Malaysia Dr Badre Eddine Allali said Dr Mahathir's visit to his country reflected the strong will of the Malaysian Prime Minister and that of Prime Minister Abderrahmane Youssoufi of Morocco to strengthen economic and trade relations between the two countries.

"Malaysia and Morocco have always enjoyed excellent relations at the political level but we see that at the economic and trade levels a lot has to be done," he told Bernama in an interview recently.

Allali said a number of agreements on trade, economy, technical cooperation, information communication technology and air services had been sealed "and more agreements are to be signed during this coming visit."

While some might feel that the great distance and differences in language between Malaysia and the three countries can hamper a more productive relationship, there are ways to overcome this artificial impediment.

While the official language in Morocco, Libya and Bahrain is Arabic, English is the commercial language while the cost of travel can be overcome.

As in the word of Ambassador Allali, "In the future, we're hoping to be able to sign some pacts in the field of maritime transportation in order to try to overcome the cost of travel."

In Morocco, Dr Mahathir would spend time with Malaysian students in an informal gathering at the capital, Rabat.

Currently there are under 50 Malaysians pursuing higher studies in Morocco in various fields such as linguistics and law.

"I must say that studying in Morocco will not cost very much because the cost of living is not very high and Muslims will feel at home being in a friendly Islamic country," he added.

Noting a similar number of Moroccans studying in Malaysia, the ambassador said that he hoped greater cooperation in this area could be attained through exchange of academics.

An area which will certainly see sharing of knowledge and experience is agriculture.

Allali said, "A group of Moroccans from the National Agronomic Institute came to Malaysia a fortnight ago to learn from Malaysia's experience. Similarly, there is great interest among Malaysians to come to Morocco to learn about the Moroccan experience."

Besides the rising number of Malaysian students, Morocco has also seen an increasing number of Malaysian tourist arrivals partly due to a greater interest in Islamic countries following the Sept 11 attacks on the US and its reaction to Muslims.

Allali said that information gathered from some Malaysian travel agents revealed that their income from Malaysians' visit to Morocco in the first two months of this year had surpassed their whole income from this destination last year.

But the number of tourists from both sides was still very low and this could be further exploited, Allali said.

He also hoped that the present contact between Petronas and Moroccan oil companies could be formalised into joint ventures during the visit.

Aside from boosting trade ties, Dr Mahathir's trip is expected to have bearings on issues of interest to Islamic nations, particularly the situation in Palestine.

The Palestine issue could certainly be among the topics to be discussed between the leaders, given the fact that the just-concluded special session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM) on Terrorism in Kuala Lumpur had nominated Malaysia to lead the ICFM Committee on Terrorism.

Wisma Putra said Malaysia attached great importance to this visit, as it believed it would further strengthen and enhance bilateral relations and economic cooperation between Malaysia and all the three countries.

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