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Dr M holds crucial talks with Myanmar's senior general

Syed Nazri

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, making a brief but highly significant visit to Myanmar, held talks with Senior General Than Shwe, Myanmar's State Peace and Development Council chairman, shortly after his arrival here yesterday.

No details were immediately available on what the two leaders discussed at Pyithu Hluttaw (Parliament House) but officials say the meeting, and the visit, carried extra weight at a time when Malaysia is back and bullish as a major player in off-shore investments.

Moreover, Dr Mahathir's visit comes only three months since Myanmar Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest to pave the way for a national reconciliation process, which Malaysia is said to have helped initiate.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said Dr Mahathir had always been known to be a major player in the promotion of Malaysia-Myanmar ties.

"His visit this time is to keep updated on developments that are taking place in the country as far as political and economic relations are concerned," he said shortly before the Prime Minister arrived here.

Dr Mahathir will spend only about 24 hours in Myanmar, on his fourth visit since 1988. But a tight programme is in store, especially today when at least six functions have been lined up for him, including giving a keynote speech at the Malaysia-Myanmar Technology Conference.

Syed Hamid said events arranged in conjunction with Dr Mahathir's visit would also go a long way towards improving the investment climate in the country, which is known to be very rich in natural resources.

Malaysia, he said, would give its full assistance to Myanmar in the development of its information technology.

With its RM2.23 billion investment - mainly in timber processing, hotels, tourism, trading, mining, agriculture and manufacturing - Malaysia is the fourth-largest investor in Myanmar after Singapore, the United Kingdom and Thailand.

Syed Hamid said Myanmar, which went through several years of economic and political isolation, had opened up quite significantly but it was important for other countries to realise that changes in Myanmar must be achieved at a pace with which it is comfortable.

He added there had to be a continuous dialogue among the Myanmar people in the national reconciliation process and there could not be outside interference.

"The whole process is not moving slowly; it is moving in the right direction," he added.

Dr Mahathir and Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali attended a state banquet hosted by Than Shwe at Parliament House last night.