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PM's official visit enhances ties

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's official visit to Germany in March underscored the excellent state of bilateral relations between the two countries.

The four-day trip, which took Dr Mahathir and his 100-member delegation from Munich to the capital of Berlin, cemented the smart and successful partnership between the two nations.

The ties can now be described as excellent, growing, substantive and friendly.

While in Germany, Dr Mahathir, known for keeping a gruelling pace in all his overseas visits, also visited the Mercedes Benz and BMW production facilities.

After a series of talks and dialogues with German leaders and captains of industry, the outcome was apparent: relations between the two nations have reached a higher level.

For four days, the Germans were "bombarded" with nothing but Malaysia as Dr Mahathir, Malaysia's No. 1 salesman, and delegation went on promoting the country.

"The programme was tight but slotting everything in a short period is a better approach as we were able to keep the momentum, reminding them all the time about the benefits of doing business in Malaysia," said International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, a member of the delegation.

The first sell-Malaysia-session was when Dr Mahathir, soon after touching down at Munich Airport, addressed some 300 top company executives and business leaders at the Malaysian-German Business Forum.

There he delivered a message investors were waiting to hear, that their investments would be safe, there would be consistency and stability and investors need not worry about any sudden changes in policies.

The assurance is indeed vital as awareness about Malaysia and issues concerning the country were still low in Germany, even among its policy makers and opinion leaders.

Rafidah said she was surprised by the lack of knowledge about Malaysia among some Germans.

One approach to be taken by Malaysia is to enlist the help of the 300 companies with German interests operating in Malaysia to disseminate more information about the country in Germany.

With companies now shifting their attention to China as the country to place their money, German investors have to be courted with the correct information.

Total Malaysian-German trade last year stood at 5.9 billion euros (RM19.78 billion), with Malaysia registering a surplus in export of 919 million euros. The figure is expected to increase to 6.5 billion euros this year, with Malaysia exporting products worth 3.8 billion euros.

Dr Mahathir had another opportunity to sell Malaysia when he met leaders and members of the influential Bunderverband der Deutschen Industrie or Confederation of German Industries and Ostasiatischer Verein or the German-Asia Pacific Business Association in Berlin.

Briefing the audience on investment and business opportunities in Malaysia, he said German firms would be most welcome to invest in the automotive sector.

Businessmen aside, he also had talks with German Chancellor Gerhard

Schroeder, Bavarian State premier Dr Edmund Stoiber and president of the German Bundestag Wolfgang Thierse. With events of Sept 11 still fresh in everyone's mind, Dr Mahathir said the visit provided Malaysia with the chance to state its stand on various issues, like terrorism.

The Germans were also eager and keen to know Malaysia's perception and analysis on Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Indonesia.

If the aim of the visit was to promote bilateral trade and investment in both countries, there is no doubt the trip achieved its goal.

Another highlight of Dr Mahathir's visit was the official opening of the Malaysian Embassy at Klingelhoferstrasse 6, Berlin.

Dr Mahathir and his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali also managed to do some sightseeing during the visit. They were taken on a city tour of Berlin that enabled them to see the development of the city since the reunification in 1990.

Among the locations were the Potsdamer Platz, which was Europe's busiest square in the 1920s but was destroyed in the war and left undeveloped until 1991; the East Side Gallery, a 1.3km stretch of the Berlin Wall, which has been preserved as a memorial; and Check Point Charlie, a former border crossing point.

Dr Mahathir also visited Adlershof, Berlin's city of science, technology and media. It is a new district to be redeveloped until 2010 with university and research institutions, media companies, technology companies and new residential quarters for 10,000 inhabitants.

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