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Undertaking to correct trade imbalance, boost ties

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MALAYSIA and Pakistan on Friday reaffirmed their commitment to promoting closer relations and co-operation, with Malaysia giving an undertaking to address the trade imbalance now favouring it.

Emerging from a 90-minute talks at Aiwan-i-Sadr, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and President Pervez Musharraf both concurred that the bonds of friendship and economic relations between both countries would deepen in future.

Areas for increasing trade relations where Malaysian investors could participate have been identified including bio-technology, telecommunications, information technology and construction.

Dr Mahathir, describing Pakistan as Malaysia's close friend, said both countries held similar views on various bilateral, regional and international issues.

The Prime Minister was on a two-day working visit to Pakistan, the second leg of his three-nation tour which includes India and Saudi Arabia.

"I came to Pakistan to see for myself developments in the country because sometimes news reports do not reflect the real thing."

Admitting the trade imbalance with Pakistan, he said ways to address it would be studied, adding that Malaysia was interested to know more about other things it could procure from Pakistan.

Bilateral trade currently amounts to US\$450 million (RM1.7 billion) a year. Malaysia's exports to Pakistan are mainly palm oil while imports comprise rice, cotton, wheat, fresh fruits and leather products.

Later at a state dinner, Dr Mahathir said there was potential for Malaysians and Pakistanis to work together in the field of information and communication technology and scientific research.

He said Malaysia could benefit from Pakistan's experiences in the three areas.

To help address the trade imbalance, the Prime Minister said Malaysia would be more than pleased to work together with Pakistan to promote Pakistani products in Malaysia through trade fairs and exhibitions.

He said Malaysia and Pakistan shared many common positions and were committed to the global effort in eradicating terrorism and religious fanaticism.

In his speech, Musharraf said Dr Mahathir's absence when he retires next October would create an enormous void.

However, he expressed confidence that Dr Mahathir's contributions and service to Malaysia would be long remembered and cherished.

"I also hope that your successor will prove worthy of your legacy."

Musharraf said Malaysia today was synonymous with rapid progress, prosperity, peace and tranquility.

"The success and sagacity with which the Malaysian leadership has welded together a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society is a source of envy for many nations.

"We, in Pakistan, too are firmly committed to developing a tolerant and cohesive society."

At the joint Press conference after the talks, to a question on the Kashmir issue, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would stick to its known stance that it should be resolved through the Security Council resolutions.

He also ruled out the possibility of Malaysia playing any mediatory role between Pakistan and India in resolving the Kashmir issue.

Asked to elaborate on his suggestion that Muslim nations use oil as a weapon, Dr Mahathir said he was not suggesting that Muslim oil-producing countries deprived the world of oil.

Since they were major oil producers, he felt they could use it as a weapon to influence international issues, but only if they were united.

Musharraf was asked on a report in the New York Times which claimed that Pakistan has transferred nuclear technology to North Korea.

The President dismissed it as absolutely baseless.

Briefing Malaysian reporters, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said Malaysia was pushing for a special meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Conference be convened to discuss developments in the Middle East and Iraq.

He said Dr Mahathir conveyed this to Musharraf and the latter had given his support.

"It is better for the OIC to make its stand known rather than keeping quiet," Syed Hamid said.

On Pakistan becoming a dialogue partner of Asean and a member of the Asian Regional Forum, Syed Hamid said Musharraf had asked Dr Mahathir for Malaysia's support.

The two leaders also discussed Afghanistan, and Musharraf briefed Dr Mahathir on the recently-concluded election in Pakistan.