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Mahathir-Germany (Wrap up)

OPPORTUNITIES, NATURAL WONDERS AWAIT GERMAN VISITORS TO MALAYSIA

By: Abdul Muin Abdul Majid

BERLIN, March 22 (Bernama) -- The hard work put in by members of the Malaysian delegation led by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to promote Malaysia to the Germans was plain to see by all at the just-concluded three-day visit by the Prime Minister to Germany.

Right from the word go, business seminars, luncheon meetings, interchanges with prominent Germans, dinners and visits to big German corporations were the order of the day.

Dr Mahathir set the gruelling pace going soon after his arrival in Munich on Monday by delivering a keynote address at the Malaysian-German Business Forum, outlining Malaysia's aspirations to the audience and inviting them to invest in Malaysia.

He did the same thing here at his meeting with members of the Confederation of German Industries and German-Asia Pacific Business Association.

It is not easy for a small country like Malaysia to sell itself to a nation like Germany that has always been perceived somewhat as Europe-centric but Dr Mahathir undertook the task at hand with much ease and panache.

International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said it was only recently that one had this feeling that the Germans were looking out to Asia now because of the China factor.

The minister said she had been to Germany several times before but it had always occurred to her that here, more than anywhere else, information about countries like Malaysia was still lacking.

That was why Rafidah described the visit as successful because it was a focused one.

"We met the business sector, we reached out to people in research and development, we met opinion leaders, and our Members of Parliament, senators met their own counterparts, the business people met theirs.

"In other words, we reached out to as many groups and sectors as possible, all within a short period. Mind you, it is not a holiday. Really, there was no time for anything else at all," she remarked.

Apart from Rafidah, the delegation comprised Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar; Energy, Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Amar Leo Moggie; Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mohamad Khir Toyo; Melaka Chief Minister Datuk Seri Ali Rustam; six Parliamentarians and members of the private sector.

Dr Mahathir was also accompanied on the visit by his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali. Before coming to Germany, he was in Russia and on Thursday proceeded from Berlin to Warsaw to begin a visit to Poland.

The prime minister used every opportunity both in Munich and here to market Malaysia as a good investment haven with an emphasis on the fields of information and communication technology (ICT) as well as engineering.

He extolled the virtues of Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor, a 750 sq km area south of Kuala Lumpur designated as a hub for the development of multimedia development and services which has attracted over 640 companies so far.

And true to his style, Dr Mahathir did not fail to air his and Malaysia's views, whether at business seminars or in private meetings, on various topics such as globalisation, the country's economic climate, the emergence of China, Asean, Islam and the Muslims as well as terrorism.

At one point, he deftly handled an "advice" from a German participant of a business forum in Munich that Malaysia should not push too much towards becoming an industrialised nation at the expense of its quality of environment.

"You are entitled to your own opinion, but Malaysia has to make some money for its people," Dr Mahathir shot back at the man.

Several of his responses earned him applause from participants like the one where he said the very people who condemned Malaysia for taking unorthodox measures to stabilise the Malaysian financial and economic situation at the height of the regional financial crisis, were the ones who now subscribed bonds issued by the country.

From his talks with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder here on a cold and drizzly Wednesday, it emerged that Dr Mahathir had taken pains to explain about developments in the Muslim world and steps taken by Malaysia to keep the terrorism menace in check.

Also, Malaysia is interested to forge closer cooperation with Germany in the field of education to take advantage of this country's free education and excellent hands-on approach with regard to vocational training.

And a funny thing happened at the joint press conference attended by the two leaders after their talks at Schroder's office in the Federal Chancellery complex in downtown Berlin.

It started off fairly well with remarks by Schroder and a short one by Dr Mahathir on the outcome of their meeting followed by a question directed at the prime minister from a member of the Malaysian press corp.

But just before the assembled Malaysian and German media members could pose the next question, Schroder said thank you and in a second it was over.

A Malaysian journalist dryly remarked that he had flown 14 hours to get to Germany and the least Schroder could do was allow a few more questions from the floor.

Another Malaysian delegation member wondered aloud if the Chancellor's action was meant to duck sensitive questions from German reporters given that elections would be held in Germany later this year.

But Dr Mahathir saved the day when he disclosed to Malaysian journalists later that renowned German car maker BMW had chosen Malaysia to set up its operations centre for Asia.

The prime minister also gamely played the role of Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister when he said at a function that Malaysia could use some more tourists from Germany as only slightly over 70,000 of them visited Malaysia last year.

In inviting German businessmen to Malaysia to see for themselves what the country had to offer, Dr Mahathir said that at the very least they could enjoy a good holiday in a country still 50 per cent covered by natural forests.

Rafidah expressed hope that German airline Lufthansa would resume flights to Kuala Lumpur to facilitate movements of people between the two countries.

Dr Mahathir also opened the Malaysian embassy in Berlin complete with a rousing welcoming beat of the "kompang" and "bunga manggar" as guests were treated with Malaysian hospitality and a sumptuous buffet featuring rice served in coconut shells.

"I hope the Germans won't think that we still eat like this back home," quipped a Kuala Lumpur-based businessman present at the function.

A visit to Berlin would not be complete without a trip to what has remained of the Berlin Wall which divided East and West Berlin prior to 1990.

Dr Mahathir and the rest of the Malaysian delegation did just that as they went on a tour of the historic city which included a detour to the exciting Potsdamer Platz which in the 1920's was Europe's busiest square but completely destroyed by war and left undeveloped until decades later.

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