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PM-Visit

DR MAHATHIR'S ALGERIA VISIT MARKS NEW ERA IN BILATERAL TIES

From Mokhtar Hussain

ALGIERS, Aug 10 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Algeria beginning Sunday is expected to widen the horizons in bilateral ties between Malaysia and the northern African nation.

The Prime Minister's visit, at the invitation of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, is mainly aimed at building a strong partnership with Algeria, particularly in its nation-building efforts.

Dr Mahathir is leading a 127-member delegation, which includes 50 businessmen, on a three-day visit.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said talks would focus on working out suitable approaches for Malaysia to participate in Algeria's development, like in highway, housing and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure projects.

"At the request of Algeria, we have submitted a plan based on studies by the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) for study and drawing up a follow-up action plan," he told Malaysian journalists here.

He said the studies covered the agricultural, telecommunications, mining and tourism sectors.

The four-eye meeting between Dr Mahathir and Bouteflika is expected to touch on developments in the West Asian peace talks, the situation in Iraq, the threat of international terrorism and unity among Islamic countries.

Dr Mahathir will also personally extend an invitation to Bouteflika to attend the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) summit in Kuala Lumpur in October.

Among those in the delegation are Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Abdul Hamid Zainal Abidin, the Menteri Besar of Kedah, Perlis and Negeri Sembilan, six Members of Parliament and 30 government officials.

Three agreements on trade, ICT and the exchange of news are expected to be signed during the visit.

"Under the arrangement on ICT cooperation, at least 15 Algerian officers will be trained in Malaysia," Syed Hamid said.

Dr Mahathir will also deliver a speech at the Malaysia-Algeria Business Dialogue and visit the new "cyber" town of Sidi Abdellah and one of the areas hit by an earthquake last May which killed at least 250 people.

"This is the first phase in (boosting) bilateral ties and this visit is to pave the way for closer cooperation," Syed Hamid said.

He said Algeria needed plenty of capital to develop the country, which has just emerged from civil war that broke out after it gained independence from France in 1962.

Trade between the two countries currently stands at RM95.3 million, with Malaysian exports amounting to RM91.3 million.

At the moment, Petronas is the only Malaysian company operating in Algeria after it signed in 2001 a Production Sharing Contract (PSC) with Sonatrach, its Algerian counterpart, for the Ahnet Block, onshore Algeria.

Under the PSC, Petronas and its partners, which include Gaz de France, will carry out further exploration works to realise the gas potential in the block, which is located about 1,250km southwest of Algiers.

Algeria is presently the largest gas supplier to Europe, both in the form of Liquefied Natural Gas and pipelines gas.

According to Syed Hamid, Proton is also looking into the possibility of

penetrating the Algerian car market, which is currently controlled by French-made vehicles.

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