

05/06/2004

Promoting East Asian integration

CHINA may have been the first non-Asean country that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi visited, signifying its increasing economic and strategic importance to Malaysia. But the Prime Minister's trip to Japan can hardly be considered less significant. After looking east to Japan for more than 20 years, Malaysia continues to enjoy a substantive and beneficial partnership since diplomatic relations were established in 1958, 14 years before ties were forged with Beijing. Despite the rising profile of China, Japan remains the second biggest economy in the world with a GDP triple that of China. The signs of Japan's recovery after more than a decade of sluggish economic performance can only mean good news for Malaysia. With more than 1,400 companies involved - half of them in manufacturing - Japan is one of the country's top three foreign investors. Bilateral trade was almost RM97 billion last year, and tourist arrivals from Japan are on the increase once again. The further liberalisation of trade and investment being negotiated under the Japan-Malaysian Economic Partnership Agreement will foster greater co-operation to the mutual benefit of both countries.

It is a pity that these vigorous economic indicators have not been matched by signs of progress in the establishment of the Malaysia-Japan University of Technology. At his meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Abdullah said the issue of funding had not been resolved. First proposed by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad at a meeting with Koizumi in 2001, the joint university was originally scheduled to open this month.

Another project that has not made much headway is that of the East Asian community. The Prime Minister believes that Asean+3 "provides the most productive framework" to that end. However, although it is already symbolically, diplomatically, and politically important, he said "there is a need to generate creative and productive ideas to give meat and concrete substance" to the process. It is hoped that concrete proposals will emerge from the Second East Asian Congress and the East Asia Forum to be held this year in Malaysia.

(END)