

16/02/2005

Trade expected to be focus of Abdullah's visit

By Salehuddin Othman

THERE are floods in Baluchistan and snow in the northern territories has killed hundreds, but in Islamabad it is quite pleasant and festive to welcome several very important visitors.

Apart from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf is also welcoming British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and India's Foreign Affairs Minister, Natwar Singh.

The presence of so many important personages in town has had its effect on non-VIPs such as journalists, in that everything that can vaguely be called decent accommodation has been fully booked.

And to make way for the rather large 60-member Malaysian entourage accompanying Abdullah here, Wisma Putra has seen fit to house the journalists in the grouping in a diaspora of guest houses, bed and breakfasts and other such lodgings in various parts of the city.

Now, for an average backpacker, these places are charming, cosy and at a stretch of the imagination, actually beautiful in a rustic sort of way. But devoid of business centres, high speed Internet or telephone connections that will work with Malaysian-made laptops, these lodgings are less than suitable for journalists, who have been reduced to working in Internet cafes.

However, these trivialities will not impact on the lavish welcome that the Pakistanis have laid out for Abdullah's first visit here since becoming Prime Minister.

The airport road and town is festooned with bunting and "welcome" banners, and very graphic advertisements in the local papers proclaim Malaysian-Pakistani partnership for peace and prosperity.

Malaysia's relations with Pakistan are indeed long and cordial. Beginning in the time of Tunku Abdul Rahman and mutual co-operation in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) that was formed then, these relations have been strengthened with co-operation in trade, defence and the global political sphere.

Since then, Malaysian prime ministers have made it a point to come here. Tun Dr Mahathir visited Pakistan five times in the 22 years he was Malaysian premier.

Abdullah is also no stranger to Islamabad. In his capacity as Foreign Minister, he accompanied Dr Mahathir and was active in fostering bilateral co-operation and relations.

Malaysia, which exported RM2.6 billion-worth of goods to Pakistan last year, is its seventh-largest trading partner. Much of that trade is in palm oil, but this is set to diversify with the establishment of the Pakistan Investment Board office in Kuala Lumpur last June.

The office was set up partly to remove the negative perception that investors have of Pakistan.

Today, Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz is expected to brief Abdullah on the economic reforms being implemented in the country, partly to attract more investors from countries such as Malaysia, which will interest Malaysian companies such as Tenaga Nasional Bhd, Petronas, Max Corporation (development), Ranhill (housing) and Dancom (telecommunications) which have already substantially invested in Pakistan.

Trade is expected to be the main agenda of the visit and Pakistan may take this opportunity to propose that both countries sign a Free Trade

Agreement that was first mooted at the first Malaysia-Pakistan joint-commission meeting in Putrajaya in October.

Malaysian High Commissioner to Pakistan Tan Sri Md Hashim Hussein said free trade between the two countries and the restructuring of the OIC were expected to be discussed.

With a population of 150 million, 98 per cent of whom is Muslim, Pakistan has the world's third-largest Muslim population after Indonesia and India.

It has tremendous potential for investment in agriculture, manufacturing, information technology, infrastructure development, housing, food processing and tourism.

It would have attracted investments from Western countries if not for its volatile political situation, graft and festering conflict with India since partition in 1947. But much of this has changed since President Musharraf took over the country's helm.

(END) Source : New Straits Times