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Be our champion at WTO talks, KL told

Firdaus Abdullah; K.T. Chelvi

PUTRAJAYA, Tues. - South Africa wants Malaysia to play a pivotal role in championing the cause of developing nations by making a strong representation during the World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting in Cancun, Mexico.

Pretoria was of the opinion that Kuala Lumpur, as the chair of the Non-Aligned Movement, could be the voice of developing nations in balancing the often discriminating WTO rules and resolutions.

South African President Thabo Mbeki, who is on a three-day working visit here, also expects greater co-operation from Malaysia to unite developing and South countries.

Both leaders agreed on the importance of developing and South nations co-operating for their mutual benefit in international trade, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said at a Press conference after attending a high-level Malaysian and South African delegation meeting at the Prime Minister's Office here.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Mbeki saw the need for co-operation to ensure that the WTO's decisions did not discount the interest of developing nations, he said.

"They feel that greater co-operation and networking is vital to ensure that the new trading system is beneficial and not discriminatory," he added.

Before heading their respective delegations in a 60-minute discussion, Dr Mahathir and Mbeki engaged in a 90-minute meeting where they touched on bilateral and multi-lateral issues.

Syed Hamid said that, among others, the two leaders were committed to ensuring that labour-related issues were not tied to trade and economic matters during the WTO meeting as the two issues must be handled separately.

"Both leaders agree that the question of labour is not a trade issue but is a matter of human resource, so this should not be connected to trade or economic matters.

"They also agree that South Africa and Malaysia must have further discussion to effectively forward the views of developing nations in this context," he said, adding that on the bilateral front, Pretoria and Kuala Lumpur enjoyed a remarkable relationship as "old friends".

Syed Hamid said Mbeki also expressed his gratitude to Malaysia and Dr Mahathir for Kuala Lumpur's role in the economic development of South Africa, particularly in the petroleum, telecommunications and human resource development initiatives.

"Mbeki said they have also learned a lot from the Malaysian experience in economic development and restructuring of society, particularly in the context of equity distribution (economy) for the natives.

"They take Malaysia as a model nation for holistic development, especially in ensuring stability as only by remaining stable can economic development progress unhindered."

Malaysia is the third largest foreign investor in South Africa. Apart from being an active partner in the nation's economic development, companies such as Petronas and Telekom are also actively involved in educating and enhancing the human resource capability of South Africans.

Petronas and Telekom also offer annual scholarships to South African students and workers under the "Black Empowerment" policy, a policy

similar to the New Economic Policy, which practises positive discrimination to uplift the status of the natives.

During his meeting with Dr Mahathir, Mbeki also thanked Malaysia for Kuala Lumpur's role as a "sincere friend" at all times.

To ensure greater people-to-people interaction via tourism and business, both nations had also agreed to increase the flight frequency between the two capitals, and to extend the link to Latin America.

"We can benefit a great deal by further enhancing our strong bilateral relations and set an example to other developing nations on how effective co-operation between developing nations can empower us," he said, adding that South Africa was also keen on sharing its experience in terrorism through the Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism, which is based here.

Earlier in Kuala Lumpur, Mbeki was given a state welcome at Parliament square.

Mbeki and First Lady Zanele Mbeki were received by Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin and Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Fauziah.

Mbeki then inspected the guard of honour mounted by the 103 officers and men from the 1st Battalion of the Royal Malay Regiment and was given a 21-gun salute.

Present were Dr Mahathir and his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, ministers, senior government officials and foreign diplomats.