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Chirac, PM to discuss issues

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - French president Jacques Chirac, flying in on a six-hour working visit on Tuesday, is expected to discuss the situation in Iraq and the peace process in the Middle East with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Also expected to figure in discussions with the Prime Minister are North Korea's recent posturing and the situation in Myanmar, especially with regard to the continued detention of Opposition leader Ang San Suu Kyi.

It is understood that Chirac, the first French President ever to visit Malaysia, will also raise the issue of multi-lateralism and the unipolar world with Dr Mahathir.

Also expected to feature in discussions is the direction in which the European Union is heading, especially with regard to the new constitution being envisaged for the grouping.

Diplomatic sources said that while there was no official agenda for the meeting, these issues were expected to feature prominently in talks between the leaders.

Chirac will be here at Dr Mahathir's invitation en route to France after visiting French territories in the South Pacific, besides attending a summit of island nations in the region.

Dr Mahathir met Chirac at the Enlarged Group of Eight (G8) summit in Evian, France in May and at the "Reconstructing of Lebanon" or Paris Conference II last November. They also met at the 4th Asia-Europe meeting in Copenhagen in September last year.

Chirac also gave a lunch in honour of Dr Mahathir in April when the Prime Minister was on holiday in France.

"There is a good personal relationship between the two leaders. A president of France has never come to the capital of Malaysia. That is a purpose (for the visit) in itself," French Ambassador to Malaysia Jacques Lapouge, said in an interview.

Lapouge said Chirac would have "a long meeting" with Dr Mahathir followed by dinner in Putrajaya hosted by the Prime Minister.

"The President may want to take stock of our good relationship and say hello to Dr Mahathir. It is a signal of the friendship of France," he said.

Chirac will also meet Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi "as we have to think of the future too".

France is also eager to co-operate with Malaysia on anti-terrorism activities via the newly-established South-East Asia Centre for Counter Terrorism.

Chirac will be accompanied by his Minister of Overseas Departments and Territories, Brigitte Girardin, and nine senior Government officials.

Wisma Putra, in a statement, said bilateral trade between the two countries had been improving, with last year recording RM9.43 billion in total trade - the first time it was in Malaysia's favour.

Between January and May this year, bilateral trade stood at RM4.64 billion, with more than 50 per cent of Malaysian exports comprising semi-conductor devices.

Malaysia Airlines has bought French aircraft. Besides, there is an agreement to purchase two Scorpene submarines. French investment here for last year alone amounted to RM76 million.