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Dr M to pave way for new trade ties with Ukraine

Syed Nadzri

UKRAINE, perhaps best remembered by most Malaysians as being home to Chernobyl, appears to have buried the ghost of its catastrophic past.

There is no clear sign - not in this capital city at least - to show that just 17 years ago, there was a disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor barely 200km north - an explosion that sent radioactive materials the equivalent of 300 nuclear bombs into the air.

People in the streets, too, would rather talk about something else than be prodded to recall what really happened. Or whether it is still safe at the site.

Some of them say in a light-hearted sort of way that there is no radiation around them and they are leading normal lives.

The city, in fact, is spruced up for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's four-day official visit to the country, a former Soviet republic which gained independence 12 years ago.

Dr Mahathir arrived yesterday, accompanied by his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. They flew in by a special aircraft from London and touched down at the Boryspil International Airport at 1.40pm local time.

He was met on arrival by Ukraine Chief of the Presidential Administration V. Medvedchuk, Foreign Minister A. Zlenko, Charge d'affaires of Ukraine in Malaysia Valentyn Velychko, and Mayor of Kiev O. Omelchenko.

Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah were driven to the Government Guest House where they were received by other Malaysians.

The official welcoming ceremony will take place today to be followed by a restricted meeting between Dr Mahathir and Ukrainian President Leonid D. Kuchma and then a delegation meeting.

Four Ministers are in the Prime Minister's delegation - Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik and Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad.

Dr Mahathir's hectic itinerary for today includes a visit to the Antonov aircraft plant.

Tomorrow, the Prime Minister proceeds to the port city of Odessa, which officials say offers huge potential for the storage and distribution of Malaysian palm oil to Eastern Europe.

Dr Mahathir moves on to Simferopol later the same day to visit the prestigious Crimean State Medical University, where about 400 Malaysians are studying. Dr Mahathir returns to Malaysia on Wednesday afternoon.

Syed Hamid told reporters that Malaysia was keen to forge close ties and co-operation with Ukraine, especially in trade and tourism.

He said Malaysia was looking for partners to co-operate in new technological fields, and Ukraine was a potential.

The Prime Minister would also invite Kuchma to visit Malaysia, he said.

Syed Hamid said Malaysia was prepared to consider opening its representative office in Ukraine.

"For now, our ambassador in Poland is concurrently accredited to Ukraine," he said.

Ukraine opened its representative office in Kuala Lumpur in August last year.