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`Visit will take ties to new dimension'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - The state visit of Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin and Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Fauziah to Italy from Monday is expected to take bilateral ties which began at Malaysia's independence to a new dimension.

Italian ambassador to Malaysia Anacleto Felicani said the visit indicated the strategic importance of Malaysia to his country and vice versa.

He said the steady bilateral relationship was also expected to result in the signing of agreements soon on scientific co-operation and tourism.

"We are hoping to finalise a scientific agreement which will be signed in future while a tourism agreement is also being finalised," he said in an interview on the King's four-day visit to Italy.

Asked about the significance of the King's visit, he said Italy viewed Malaysia as an important country in an emerging part of the world.

"The visit is historic and has deep significance as relations have already been very friendly since the outset. This visit shows that the relationship is on a sure footing and forward-oriented," he added.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad met his Italian counterpart Silvio Berlusconi in Denmark last year in what was seen as a strengthening of the bilateral relationship.

Italy was among a handful of countries that established diplomatic relations with Malaya soon after its independence in 1957.

Felicani, who will be accompanying the King and Queen on the visit, hoped the royal couple would be able to stop over at the European Design Centre in Milan for a first-hand view of developments there.

"This could lead to the possibility of co-operation with similar establishments in Malaysia. It is a two-way street (with Malaysia and Italy enjoying mutual benefits)," he added.

The European Union representative in Malaysia said the country was a model of progress in a multi-religious and multi-cultural society under Dr Mahathir's leadership.

Felicani said the EU was going to establish a centre for food control in Parma soon which could be of assistance to Malaysia.

"Italy is prepared to co-operate with Malaysia in the field of agriculture.

"You are working towards protecting the origins of your agricultural products. You are exactly on the same wavelength as Italy."

He added that Italy was on the cutting edge in the field. Italy was also the largest producer of rice in Europe, a field in which both countries could co-operate.

Italy, he added, also imported all its pepper from Sarawak.

"There are many windows of opportunity for co-operation between both countries. We have advanced technology in satellites, even by small and medium enterprises, an area in which we can co-operate."