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Japan impressed with Abdullah's convincing leadership qualities

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TOKYO: The Deputy Prime Minister had arrived in Tokyo last Wednesday with a mission to let the Japanese know "Who is this (Datuk Seri) Abdullah Ahmad Badawi?"

During his stay in Tokyo, it rained almost every day. The city appeared grey and sombre, but within the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo's classy Hibiya district, where the 200-strong Malaysian delegation stayed, the mood could not be more upbeat, especially on the last day of Abdullah's visit.

The reason for this was clear. For when he departed for Kuala Lumpur, it was evident that the mission, by no means an easy one, has been well accomplished.

Abdullah's first official visit to Japan in his capacity as Deputy Prime Minister has been a momentous success.

It has served to further seal the longstanding friendship between the two countries, and enabled Abdullah to renew ties with old acquaintances besides touch base with the people that matter in Japan - its leaders, media, and, most notably, its business community.

While Abdullah may be no stranger to Japan, with many visits previously, it was particularly vital for him to bring a successful close to the visit this time for it is merely four months before he assumes Malaysia's top post upon Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's retirement in October.

The Deputy Prime Minister wanted to leave no doubt among the Japanese that he will continue building on bilateral ties, and maintain existing fundamental policies, especially those involving trade and foreign affairs, which have worked well for both nations.

The Japanese must be assured of continuity, in spite of the leadership transition, for uncertainty will be, as Abdullah had pointed out succinctly, "bad for business".

Considering Japan's role in Malaysia's economy - it is the country's second largest trading partner after the United States - it is important that the Japanese be completely assured that no radical changes will be made when Abdullah takes over.

Abdullah's keynote address at a business forum organised by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies and the Japan External Trade Organisation on Thursday was closely watched by Japanese businessmen.

Some 500 Japanese corporate leaders packed the main hall of the Tokyo Kaikan building, to see what they could glean from Abdullah's words and he was explicit with the future direction.

The clear and definitive words chosen and used by Abdullah during his address was his most forthright yet before an international, or even local, audience.

He gave his commitment that policies, especially the Look East policy, which has been the pillar of Japan-Malaysia ties, would be maintained and emphasised repeatedly that even if circumstances demanded a change in policy, there would be continuity.

He reiterated his message at every opportunity in Tokyo - in his meetings with the country's leaders, including Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Cabinet members, Diet (Parliament) members, Malaysian students in Japan and in a dialogue with Japanese journalists.

There is now little doubt that the Japanese are convinced.

Takehiro Adachi, Matsushita Electric Industrial Co Ltd's corporate international affairs group Asia team manager, said he was convinced of Abdullah's leadership capabilities.

"I was impressed with Abdullah, and what he said during the speech. I strongly believe that trade relations between the two countries will be enhanced under his leadership."

A key player in Japan's economic arena, "Mr Yen" Prof Dr Eisuke Sakakibara, who is director of Keio University's global security research centre, described Abdullah's address at the forum as an "outstanding, statesman-like speech".

While some businessmen had expressed concern over the looming China threat over foreign direct investments and "that Malaysia seemed to lack a clear strategy in attracting investors", Sakakibara believes the country will continue to be an attractive place for FDIs under Abdullah.

"Malaysia, however, must strive to maintain its good and stable political environment," said Second Finance Minister Datuk Dr Jamaludin Jarjis, who added that Malaysia was upbeat on additional Japan investments.

"With many of Japan's listed companies now generating profits, Malaysia's enhanced appeal and the SARS-adjusted strategies of investors, we are confident of more Japanese investments."

Abdullah had also taken the opportunity to convey to Japan that Malaysia was going into biotechnology "in a big way" to help increase agricultural yield and was assured of Japanese co-operation.

But what perhaps was most palpable during the visit was Abdullah's confidence and authority and he held his own during dialogue sessions, giving precise and definitive answers to all questions thrown his way. His replies were peppered with wit, which, to a large extent, helped put the audience at ease.

Malaysian students in Japan, for instance, had perhaps anticipated a serious and "official" affair when they attended a dinner-cum-dialogue with Abdullah last Friday night, but they took home an insight into the other side of the Deputy Prime Minister - the one that is casual, fun and witty.

Abdullah, who was in a relaxed mood, drew laughter and applause from his audience with a variety of jokes. Students were not hesitant to ask questions during the dialogue, and this they did until Abdullah said it was time for dinner as "everyone is hungry, what with the smell of food wafting in the air".

Abdullah spoke of his meeting with members of the National Press Club of Japan where he was asked why Malaysians were not flocking to Japan and his reply was: "Because expensive, mah!"

Which Japan indeed is, what with a glass of teh tarik - if you find a Malaysian restaurant - costing RM25, and a thin slice of watermelon about RM12.

Going by his performance in Japan, an observer said Abdullah has convinced Japan of his capabilities and has shown he understands the mechanics of the bilateral relationship. While Abdullah will likely do things in a different style, what is clear is that he is capable of shaping the future of Japan-Malaysia ties in such a way that Dr Mahathir can be at ease after he steps down.