

15/07/2003

Kuchma deeply honoured by Dr Mahathir's visit to Ukraine

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PRESIDENT Leonid D. Kuchma of Ukraine yesterday described Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to his republic as a very crucial one as he had heard so many things in the past about the Prime Minister and Malaysia's success story.

"I am deeply honoured by this visit. We have been watching Malaysia very closely, especially its long hard road towards economic development and its success in overcoming the Asian financial crisis," Kuchma said at a joint Press conference after an official welcoming reception for Dr Mahathir, who is on a four-day state visit.

A 90-minute delegation meeting was also held shortly after the red-carpet welcome at Mariinsky Palace.

Ministers in Dr Mahathir's entourage are Datuk Seri Najib Razak (Defence), Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar (Foreign), Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik (Primary Industries) and Tan Sri Musa Mohamad (Education).

Although no specific agreements were signed, both leaders expressed great confidence in the two countries exploring the huge potential available, citing areas where a synergy could be formed, such as Ukraine's defence and aviation industries, to complement Malaysia's high-technology and information technology industries and raw materials.

Kuchma said Ukraine's interest in strengthening ties was quite clear because Malaysia was an influential player in the region besides holding the chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement.

The leaders also agreed to work towards improving the movement of people between the two countries by relaxing visa requirements. Malaysia is also finalising efforts to set up an embassy in Kiev to reciprocate Ukraine's mission in Kuala Lumpur.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had a lot to learn from the Ukrainians in defence technology and was studying the possibility of sourcing some military products from the republic.

He also said he was grateful to Ukraine for admitting about 500 Malaysian students to its universities, especially those taking up medicine.

"Malaysia also accepts many foreign students in its institutions of higher learning and we are happy to receive Ukrainians, too," he added.

The Prime Minister said being a trading nation, Malaysia was always looking for new partners. In Ukraine, he said he saw great prospects for its ports to be a hub for the distribution of Malaysian goods and vice-versa.

On the balance of trade which is now in favour of Ukraine, Dr Mahathir expressed confidence the situation could be overcome if "we work harder, especially in getting our palm oil here".

Dr Mahathir later visited the Antonov aircraft plant near Kiev to view a static display of planes manufactured by the world famous aviation company.

Antonov's main activity is the design and development of cargo and passenger aircraft.

One of its products is the An-225 Mriya, the world's largest aircraft with a payload capacity of 250 tonnes.

The Prime Minister was later interviewed by Ukrainian National Television.

At the official dinner hosted by Kuchma at Mariinsky Palace last night,

Dr Mahathir paid tribute to the economic advances achieved by Ukraine since it embraced a democratic free market system.

"My visit here today is a testament to the strength of our relationship characterised by warmth and friendship since diplomatic ties were established in 1991," he said.