

16/05/2003

Meeting between old friends

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DEFYING his worried wife, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder made his four-nation visit to Southeast Asia this week, where an outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome has caused hundreds of deaths.

"The Southeast Asian region is important to Germany and that's why I decided to come anyway. If I had cancelled my plans, I would have done some political damage," he said in Kuala Lumpur on Monday.

But what he did instead was reduce the number of members in his delegation from the planned 120 to 30. Aides said the chancellor did not take any medical precautions, except to consult medical experts on the danger of SARS, which has so far killed about 600 worldwide.

But Schroeder's visit to Malaysia has been beneficial to both countries.

He and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad covered a whole range of issues of mutual interest during their meeting.

The two leaders had a "very free-flowing discussion" on issues including business relations, Iraq, the Middle East and terrorism, said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

They agreed that the United Nations should play a central role in post-war Iraq and that peace in the Middle East could only be achieved through the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Malaysia is looking to engage like-minded countries like Germany to restore confidence in the UN and in international law, damaged by the recent invasion of Iraq by the US-led forces.

Even without UN sanction, the US and Britain invaded Iraq and used their military might to forcefully oust Saddam Hussein. Germany, along with France, Russia and China, blocked a possible Security Council-approved attack against Iraq.

Schroeder, the first German Chancellor to visit Malaysia, feels that Malaysia was an important German partner at the regional and multilateral levels in the fight against terrorism.

While Germany would do all it could to fight terrorism, it would also seek ways to eliminate the reasons that led people to carry out such acts.

"Many farsighted people have advised us to pursue an open dialogue with the Islamic world. This approach is right and proper.

"Whatever happens, we must prevent terrorism and war from giving rise to a new blanket hatred, let alone a clash of civilisations," says Schroeder.

For this, both nations should do everything within their power to counter anti-Islamic and anti-Western sentiment.

Only through a peaceful reconciliation of interests based on tolerance and mutual respect can long-term security and prosperity be ensured.

Malaysia, according to Schroeder could contribute to regional stability and take a decisive stance against terrorism and religious fanaticism.

"Your country can draw on its tradition of tolerance and its harmonious diversity, thereby continuing to be an example for other multi-religious and multi-ethnic countries," he said.

Apart from international politics, Schroeder's visit was also to enhance bilateral trade between Malaysia and Germany, Malaysia and the EU as well as Asean and the EU.

Last year, total bilateral trade between Malaysia and Germany increased by five per cent to RM19.13 billion compared with the previous year, while the bilateral trade for the first two months of 2003 showed a significant increase of 33.18 per cent compared with the corresponding period last

year.

Malaysian exports to Germany comprise mainly electrical machinery and apparatus, office machines, telecommunications and sound recording equipment, scientific equipment, iron and steel, and rubber and vegetable oils.

There are already about 300 German companies operating in Malaysia and many more are keen to come.

Coinciding with Schroeder's visit, Siemens Malaysia Sdn Bhd launched its regional hub for transportation systems in Kuala Lumpur, giving a big boost to Malaysia's plan to become a major player in the regional industrial sector.

The hub will focus on designing, engineering, training and feasibility studies for the Asia-Pacific markets.

"We definitely have not yet exploited all possibilities," says German Ambassador to Malaysia Juergen A.R. Staks when asked on other areas of trade which could be explored by the two nations.

On the area of education, Malaysia is keen to send students to Germany, which produces some of the best engineers in the world, for technical studies.

On the other hand, Malaysia hopes that Muslim German intellectuals would come here to exchange views on Islam. Germany has 4.5 million Muslims.

"Chancellor Schroeder's visit was extremely successful in atmosphere, human contact and substance. I can't remember any subject of bilateral, regional or international importance that was not touched ...it was a meeting of friends and we want this relationship to continue," Staks said.