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PM: We're looking for new markets (HL)

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says Malaysia's exuberance in furthering contacts with former Eastern bloc countries is purely to take advantage of the economic opportunities. It has nothing to do with any leanings towards the East or West.

At the end of his four-day official visit to Ukraine yesterday, he told Malaysian journalists that the economic systems had changed, opening new business opportunities in many places.

"We have close ties with countries the world over because we are a trading nation and have to look for markets for our goods. And we know that we did not focus on markets in the Eastern bloc because it was a closed economy then.

"They did not buy goods from abroad and they did not have foreign exchange arrangements. But now they have adopted the free market system and this provided the opportunity to enter markets that were once closed.

"It is not a question of us leaning towards the East or West," he said when asked about the perception by some that Malaysia was beginning to lean towards the former Eastern bloc nations based on his close ties with countries like Poland, Russia and other former Soviet republics.

The Press conference was held at the government guesthouse in this scenic resort city by the Black Sea, about two hours by air from Kiev, the Ukrainian capital city.

Dr Mahathir had, on his way here on Tuesday, stopped over at the port of Odessa where he witnessed the signing of three trade agreements between businessmen from both countries, and later in Simferopol, one of the main cities in the Crimean Autonomous Region.

Dr Mahathir said he discovered that Ukraine had great potential, and with its geographical position, it could be an important trading partner for Malaysia.

He said although Ukraine lagged in some areas such as manufacturing, Malaysia could learn from it in other sectors, especially the defence, shipbuilding and aircraft industries.

He said apart from palm oil, Malaysia could also sell manufactured products and household items to Ukraine.

Dr Mahathir was later taken on a test ride on a Superfoil, a fastcraft at a nearby naval base, after which he had lunch with Malaysian students at a restaurant.

Ukrainian President Leonid D. Kuchma, who came all the way from Kiev yesterday, made a farewell call on Dr Mahathir at the guesthouse before the Prime Minister returned to Malaysia via Simferopol.