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PM to make four-day visit to Ukraine

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Malaysia's pursuit of making new friends and seeking non-traditional trading partners will be given a further boost when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad makes a four-day official visit to Ukraine from Sunday.

The visit, the first by the Prime Minister since the former Soviet republic gained independence 12 years ago, starts at the capital of Kiev before proceeding to Odessa and Simferopol, the vintage cities by the Black Sea.

Dr Mahathir left for London last night enroute to Ukraine.

Although he is due to arrive in Kiev about noon on Sunday (6pm Malaysian time), the official welcoming ceremony will only take place the following morning near Mariinsky Palace, a stately chateau used for major government functions.

This will be immediately followed by a private meeting between Dr Mahathir and Ukrainian President Leonid D. Kuchma and later a delegation meeting culminating in the signing of several bilateral agreements.

Officials say that although trade had been in Ukraine's favour, they were convinced that Dr Mahathir's visit would spur both nations to work together to make it mutually advantageous.

Dr Mahathir's hectic itinerary for Monday includes a visit to the Antonov aircraft plant in the outskirts of Kiev.

Antonov's main activity is the design and development of both cargo and passenger airplanes. The company is the sole design authority for the Antonov range of aircraft, including the An225 Mriya, the world's largest aircraft with a payload capacity of 250 tonnes.

On Tuesday, the Prime Minister proceeds to Odessa, the port city which, Malaysian officials say, offers huge potential for the transportation and distribution of palm oil to Eastern Europe.

Dr Mahathir moves on to Simferopol later the same day.

It is in this city that the Crimean State Medical University, one of the oldest and most prestigious institutions of higher learning in the Soviet republics, is located.

The Prime Minister is also scheduled to meet Malaysian students here.

On Wednesday, Dr Mahathir will visit the Livadia Palace in Simferopol, an Italian Renaissance style building erected as summer residence for the Russian Tsar Nicolas II early last century.

The Prime Minister will be accompanied by Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik and Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad.

Dr Mahathir returns to Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday afternoon.