

Businessmen move to cement bilateral ties

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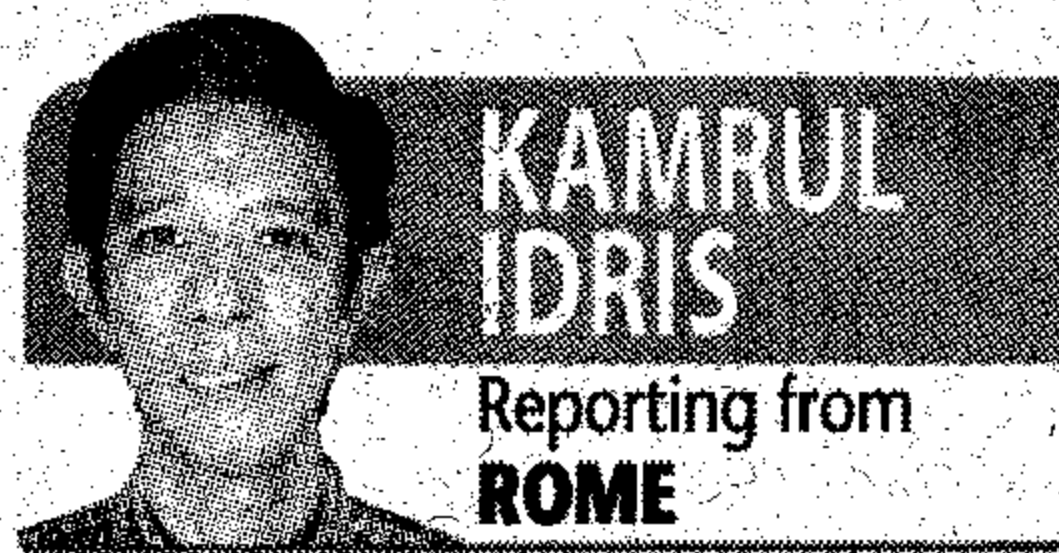
ENOUGH ice was broken between Malaysian and Italian businessmen here to add some RM15 million in prospective deals to the already healthy exchange in areas such as aviation.

But what excited officials most in the prime minister's just-concluded visit was the signing of documents to set up the formal structures of a busier relationship.

"Economic co-operation between us and Italy is not as substantial as it should be and in this visit, efforts were made to broaden and deepen economic relations," Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said as he wound up his two-day stay here on Tuesday.

Malaysia and Italy have been in each other's peripheral vision for years.

The two countries are the world's 19th and eighth largest exporters respectively with Malay-



sia focusing on the United States and East Asian markets and Italy on the European Union.

The two joint declarations — on economic co-operation and agriculture — establish government committees charged with advancing the bilateral relationship in their respective fields.

An agreement on the growth engine of agriculture, covering not just trade and market access but also research and development, had been sought after.

"We also provided emphasis on technological industries in various aspects. They have long experi-

ence in these fields and are prepared to extend co-operation."

The relative paucity of business dealings was also recognised by the Italians, whose businessmen were just as acutely aware of the opportunities gone a-begging.

"More needs to be done to strengthen relations between the two countries' industries," said Andrea Pininfarina, vice-president of Confindustria, the confederation of Italian industry.

"We should be far-sighted enough to look for new markets."

Pininfarina said a reciprocal visit by Italian businessmen would be arranged as soon as possible.

A total of 23 Malaysian and 115 Italian firms attended Tuesday's business forum, from which 158 meetings ensued, according to the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority.

A memorandum of understanding was signed between Italy's Se-

lex Sistemi Integrati and Malaysia's Advanced Air Traffic Systems Sdn Bhd for the supply of airport navigation aids.

"The business forum was attended by captains of industry, who said they were interested in more smart partnerships or joint ventures with Malaysian companies firms," the prime minister said.

There were good signs of enhanced co-operation in the future with Italian businessmen eager to visit Malaysia, he added.

The prime minister returned home last night, Bernama reports. He arrived at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Subang here at 11.45pm, accompanied by his wife, Datin Seri Jeanne Abdullah.

Abdullah and Jeanne were greeted on arrival by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, members of the cabinet and other VIPs.