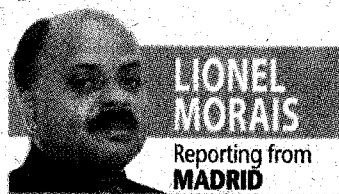


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PM to share ideas on bridging religious divide

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi arrived in Spain yesterday for a two-day United Nations forum aimed at overcoming prejudices between nations and cultures as well as promoting interfaith dialogue.

Abdullah will attend the first Alliance of Civilisations Forum, which will be jointly opened by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Rodriguez Zapatero at the Madrid Municipal Convention Centre tomorrow.

The two-day forum in the Spanish capital will bring together at least 10 national leaders, past and present, some 50 foreign ministers, corporate and film industry executives, and grassroots and civil society representatives.

The prime minister is scheduled to give a speech on "The Alliance of Civilisations: Managing Diversity in the Era of Globalisation", have an open discussion with the panellists and take part in a question-and-answer session which will be opened to the floor.

Malaysian ambassador to Spain, Datuk Naimun Ashakli Mohammad, told a media briefing that Malaysia, as an example of a democratic Islamic country with a multi-racial society, could give vital input to the forum.

"The rest will want to know how we have united the various races in the country. It will be an interactive forum where views will be exchanged on how to overcome the misconception of Islam by the



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi with Under Secretary at the Foreign Ministry of Spain, Duta Salarich (left), and Malaysian Ambassador to Spain, Datuk Naimun Ashakli Mohammad, at the Torrejon Military Airport in Madrid yesterday. — Bernama picture

West," Naimun said.

The alliance was created in 2005 on the initiative of Spain and Turkey under the auspices of the UN.

The forum is the first major event of the alliance. It aims to tackle fear and suspicion, bridge divides and overcome prejudices between Islam and the West.

Several high-profile initiatives will be announced, including projects to promote understanding among cultures, the youth and the media.

Several bilateral meetings have also been planned for the prime minister on his first official visit to

Spain since 2004.

On Wednesday, Abdullah will meet Zapatero to hand him an invitation to the Third Islamic Conference on the Muslim World and the West, which will be held in Kuala Lumpur in June.

Both leaders will also discuss the current situation in Southeast Asia, developments in Myanmar and exchange views on the Middle East.

Naimun said trade between both countries between January and October last year had increased to RM3.59 billion, with Malaysia's exports totalling RM1.27 billion.

Naimun said there was room for improvement in the relations between the two countries, particularly in trade and investment, education, tourism and the construction sector.

"Diplomatic ties are good and we hope this working visit by the prime minister will be a stepping stone in enhancing the relationship in all sectors," the ambassador said.

Another sector which Naimun said had to be scaled up was tourism.

"There is a need to have more aggressive campaigns to promote Malaysia here," he said.