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# Welcoming a 'long-lost friend'



NEW Delhi welcomed Datuk Seri Najib Razak like the return of a long-lost friend, offering Malaysia renewed relations and special access to its vast infrastructure programme.

Briefing scores of Malaysian businessmen in the second leg of his India tour here on Thursday, the prime minister said his Indian counterpart, Manmohan Singh, declared that he had been "looking forward to this visit very much".

The Indians have "gone to a lot of trouble to underscore the significance" of Najib's itinerary of discussions with the full spectrum of New Delhi's political and business elite.

The visit, with seven ministers and eight menteri besar and chief ministers in tow, had been elevated to a full state visit, the highest protocol that could be accorded to a foreign dignitary.

"They hope this will be a turning point in taking our bilateral ties to greater heights," Najib said.

He said both leaders agreed to speed up and conclude a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (Ceca), which has already been through two rounds of talks, by the time Manmohan is due to visit Malaysia at the end of the year.

"This agreement will provide new vigour and impetus to our bilateral relations, going beyond the Asean FTA," he said. India signed a free trade agreement with Asean in August, last year but businesses have lamented that it is limited to trade in goods.

Of more immediate economic value was Najib's pitch for Malaysians to take on India's public works projects,

amounting to an estimated US\$500 billion (RM1.6 trillion) over the next five years.

New Delhi recognises that poor infrastructure is holding back the world's second most populous country, which despite its problems is expected to grow by 8.5 to nine per cent this year.

"Manmohan would like Malaysian companies to play a significant part in the construction projects, mainly roads and highways but in others as well, such as airports and maybe public housing," Najib said.

"This is a golden opportunity that must not be missed."

"Very rarely has a government said openly that it would like Malaysian companies to participate.

"We must organise ourselves to best meet the request," Najib said.

"I expect Malaysian companies to deliver quality work in a timely way and to sustain their reputation."

He said India remained a committed buyer of Malaysian palm oil since all of its arable land had to be used for agriculture and food security. Other areas of potential cooperation included biotechnology, information technology, education, health tourism and power generation.

There were "no outstanding problems" at the government-to-government level. India supported Malaysia at the United Nations, and wanted the UN to be reformed, Najib believed New Delhi had a "strong case" for permanent membership in the UN Security Council.

On the touchy subject of Pakistan, the prime minister said Manmohan was sincere in wanting "to be as open as possible" with Islamabad, and asked for Kuala Lumpur's help to ease tensions between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. "I urge Pakistan to maintain the dialogue," he said.

He feared that a repeat of the terrorist attack on Mumbai in 2008 would



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak greeting Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi during their meeting in Chennai yesterday. — Bernama picture

severely destabilise the sub-continent.

Najib also promised to review visa rules, which have tended to skew against the thousands of Indian over-stayers in Malaysia.

He said the regulations should make

it simpler for bona fide tourists and business people to visit, and reap the advantages afforded by India's 300-million-strong middle class.

More than 600,000 Indians visited Malaysia last year.