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Najib's UK visit to lift ties 'out of benign neglect'

THREE years ago when he was deputy prime minister on a trip here, Datuk Seri Najib Razak said he believed much more could be done about Malaysia-Britain relations, given the historical ties between the two countries and strong bonds of friendship among their peoples.

"We must not leave our relationship in a state of benign neglect," he said in a lecture at Chatham House, home of the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

"Benign neglect" was the term he had earlier used in an address to British businesses, also in this bustling capital city, in 2005.

Najib, prime minister since April 2009, is back here and the next few days should witness the unfolding of quite a few events that reflect renewed commitments by both sides towards stepping up bilateral ties.

Among these are the signing of several agreements and memoranda of understanding today between



Malaysian and British concerns on education, transnational crimes and rail service, among other areas.

The signing ceremony is scheduled to take place after Najib's roundtable session with Britain's captains of industry.

The four-day official visit by Najib, who arrived here late yesterday accompanied by his wife, Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, has come at an opportune time.

A time when the British government under David Cameron, who became prime minister in May last year, is keen to establish better ties with the "smaller economies".

"They are undergoing a revamp to

raise revenue and reduce expenditure. Now, they are looking at how to enhance economic ties with smaller economies such as Malaysia," Malaysian high commissioner to the United Kingdom Datuk Zakaria Sulong said when briefing Malaysian journalists on Monday.

"Malaysia is also looking at attracting more investments, including from the United Kingdom."

Malaysian figures show that total two-way trade eased marginally to RM13.03 billion last year from RM13.07 billion in 2009.

Trade has been in Malaysia's favour. Last year, for example, Malaysian exports to the UK totalled RM7.19 billion while imports amounted to RM5.83 billion.

British investments in Malaysia saw an increase to US\$113 million (RM343 million) in total last year from US\$95 million in 2009. Among European Union countries, the UK is the third largest investor in Malaysia

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after Germany and the Netherlands.

Zakaria revealed that the two prime ministers had earlier spoken about bilateral relations on the phone, something which eventually

led to Najib's current visit.

"The two sides agreed that a lot (of opportunities) have been missed in the past several years."

Education is another area of interest as the UK remains one of the favourite destinations for Malaysian students despite the high cost.

There are currently 13,500 Malaysian students in British learning institutions, and surprisingly two-thirds of them are private or self-sponsored students.

Other issues that can be expected to be raised during Najib's visit include on the Commonwealth, which will hold its heads of government meeting in Perth in October, the outcome of the recent Langkawi International Dialogue in Putrajaya and Najib's idea of global movement of the moderates of all faiths to marginalise the extremists.

The big agenda, though, remains on bringing the long-standing bilateral relations to a higher plane.