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PM's visit spurs KL-Riyadh ties

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DECADES-LONG BOND:
Positive outlook on request to increase haj pilgrim quota

JEDDAH

NST Johor Bureau chief
AHMAD FAIRUZ OTHMAN

THE close bond between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia was strengthened during Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's official visit to the kingdom over the weekend.

With strong ties that have been cultivated over more than 50 years, the future looks even more positive for both nations, with Prasarana Malaysia Bhd's intention to go further into infrastructure development in the kingdom and Saudi Arabia's positive outlook on a request to increase the quota for Malaysian haj pilgrims.

These were the highlights of Najib's visit, which was at the invitation of Saudi Arabia's King Salman Abdulaziz Al-Saud. Najib had an audience with the ruler on Saturday.

Najib thanked the Saudi government for its recent decision to award a three-year contract to Prasarana to manage the Mecca Metro train system for use by haj pilgrims.

It was the second contract that Prasana received for the same project in six months.

Prime Minister ***Datuk Seri Najib Razak*** *and his wife,* ***Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor****, performing umrah at* ***Masjidil Haram*** *in Mecca yesterday.* **Bernama pic**

The Mecca Metro will benefit the millions of pilgrims who arrive at the holy land during peak season.

Najib said the service would start during this year's haj season.

The Mecca Metro will link Arafah, Mina and Muzalifah, all of which are key haj locations.

A total of 7,000 workers, including 300 Malaysians, are involved in the construction of the line.

Najib said with the trust bestowed by the Saudi government on the company, Prasarana was training its sights on more opportunities, such as a monorail system, in the kingdom and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Malaysian ambassador to Saudi Arabia Zainol Rahim Zainuddin had said the recognition given by Saudi Arabia to Prasarana's work was a testament to how Malaysian expertise was sought after in the international arena.

For Prasarana, its success in Malaysia and abroad is rooted in the company's drive to reach greater heights.

During Najib's visit to a Mecca Metro depot on Saturday, Prasarana chairman Tan Sri Ismail Adam said the prime minister encouraged the company's management and staff members to go beyond their comfort zone when it came to achieving their goals.

Another issue close to the hearts of Malaysians is the proposal to increase the quota for haj pilgrims, an issue that draws much focus because of the large number of Malaysians still on the waiting list to perform the pilgrimage.

Najib said Malaysia was leaving it to the Saudi government to decide on the quota, adding that Malaysia's position on the matter had been submitted.

Zainol Rahim said he was hopeful that the Saudi government would decide in Malaysia's favour.

The decision largely depends on whether ongoing work at Masjidil Haram would affect the number of pilgrims allowed into the country.

Najib said nevertheless, Malaysia was grateful for the Saudi government's cooperation in taking care of its pilgrims.

The kingdom has allocated a quota of 22,320 Malaysian haj pilgrims annually since 2013 because of ongoing expansion and upgrading at Masjidil Haram.

Najib described his first meeting with King Salman as being highly successful.

In turn, the ruler, who is the custodian of two holy mosques, Masjidil Haram in Mecca and Masjidil Nabawi in Madinah, expressed his intention for the kingdom and Malaysia to strengthen relations in other areas.

Najib discussed a host of bilateral issues during his meeting with King Salman as well as Crown Prince Mohammed Naif Abdulaziz Al-Saud.

They included Malaysia's interest in tapping into the methodology used by Saudi Arabia in its de-radicalisation programme, which is used to rehabilitate citizens who have been influenced by extremist ideologies.

Najib also expressed hope that more Saudi tourists would visit Malaysia.

The prime minister and his wife, Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, performed umrah on their last day of the official visit yesterday.

Najib also attended a banquet with the crown prince and had lunch with Malaysian officials at the D'Saji fine dining restaurant, which is managed by Felda D'Saji Sdn Bhd, here.