

BOOST FOR BANGSAMORO ECONOMY

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Dr M's visit a catalyst for spurring investments in new region in Mindanao



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THE arrival of Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad here last night is an impetus to a new chapter in the socio-economic development for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

Just months after the enactment of the Organic Law for the Muslim-majority Bangsamoro population in Mindanao last year — granting more autonomy to the region — Dr Mahathir's visit can be seen as a catalyst to spur new economies in the newly minted regional government.

After 60 years of maintaining close trade partnerships and bilateral ties with the Philippines, Malaysia's subsequent role in the development of the formerly embattled southern region is consequential to it being a staunch supporter of the Mindanao Peace Process between the Philippine government and the Moro Islam-

ic Liberation Front.

Malaysia has effectively played a key role as the third-party facilitator in the long-drawn peace process. Following the ratification of the Organic Law in the now autonomous region last year, Malaysia, under Dr Mahathir's leadership is taking constructive and proactive roles to help BARMM chart the next step in trade and investment opportunities, as well as business ventures.

Malaysia's unwavering commitment to this next phase of socio-economic growth in the Bangsamoro region is evident as Dr Mahathir makes this the quintessence of this part of his introductory visit to neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, shortly after taking office as the seventh prime minister.

As part of his three-day official visit to the Philippines starting yesterday, Dr Mahathir is scheduled to have a meeting with Mindanao Development Authority chairman Datu Abdul Khayr Alonto to discuss issues concerning development in the Bangsamoro regional government.

This meeting is likely to precede the inauguration of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) — the 80-member body that will govern BARMM until June 2022 — set to take place some time this month, according to news reports.

During a recent interview with the Malaysian media, the deputy chief of mission of the Embassy of Malaysia in the Philippines, Rizany Irwan Muhamad Mazlan, said the visit would also give Malaysia the opportunity to reiterate its commitment to ensuring greater safety and stability in the Philippines and the



Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali arriving at Bulwagang Kalayaan, Villamor Air Base, in Manila yesterday. BERNAMA PIC

Bangsamoro region as a third-party facilitator in the successful peace process.

"The establishment of BTA in Mindanao has paved the way for the Malaysian government, captains of industry and the private sector to give a new dimension to trade partnerships in the Bangsamoro region.

After having successfully played the role of a third-party facilitator in the peace process, Malaysia can now play another role as a trade partner."

Rizany said what this meant for the Malaysian trade mission delegates, who are part of the Malaysian-Philippine business forum today, was the opportunity to seek new businesses and explore investment potentials in a wide range of ventures, including the halal food industry, Islamic banking, construction, manufacturing and hospitality.

"It is important to forge economic engagements with the people of Bangsamoro through BTA as it will elevate their socio-economic status, and create employment and business opportunities there."

Rizany said Mindanao was poised to become a goldmine for development in the country apart from Luzon (Metro Manila) and Cebu, and urged the Malaysian private sector to be bold in forging a way forward in the autonomous region, particularly those in the housing industry.

It is hoped the series of business meetings and dealings between Malaysians companies and their Philippine counterparts, which are expected to take place during and after Dr Mahathir's visit, will generate renewed interest in the region's investment opportunities.

Just days after Dr Mahathir's official visit, themed "Partners for Progress, Brothers for Peace", Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte, in an effort to weed out bad business practices and corrupt politicians, is expected to release what has been dubbed the "narco list" ahead of the local mid-terms polls in Metro Manila.

The controversial list, which is already creating a political and social polemic due to concerns

about legal ramifications, reportedly comprises the names of politicians allegedly linked to illegal drug activities — narco politicians who are dubbed "destroyers of our society" by Duterte's spokesman, Salvador Panelo, as reported in the local papers.

The meeting of Dr Mahathir and Duterte that follows a business forum today emboldens the latter's interest in keeping the country's economy on the right track by reinvigorating six decades of bilateral relationship and close cooperation between the two Asian "brothers".

While the newly minted government under Dr Mahathir's leadership is pulling out all the stops in stamping out graft and corrupt practices in Malaysia, Duterte is taking effective measures to address concerns about drug money taking root in local elections by making the "narco list" public.

Consequently, all eyes will be on Malacanang Palace later today where the 94-year-old Malaysian statesman and Duterte will have a four-eyed meeting and are expected to issue joint statements.

Earlier in the day, Dr Mahathir was given state honours to lay a wreath in memory of national hero Dr Jose Rizal at the Rizal National Monument in Rizal Park here.

He and his wife, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, will be honoured with a state banquet at Malacanang Palace tonight.

Dr Mahathir is accompanied by Foreign Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Darell Leiking and senior officers from the ministries during the visit.