Putrajaya, Ankara to ink FTA in April

By AZURA ABAS AND A. AZIM IDRIS

PUTRAJAYA: MALAYSIA and Turkey are aiming to sign a free trade agreement (FTA) in April to bolster bilateral trade.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said both countries were committed to wrap up negotiations for the agreement, with the final round of talks scheduled to be held in Ankara on Monday.

Najib said Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had suggested that the FTA be signed in April.

"He has kindly invited me to Turkey once again so that the agreement can be signed during that visit," Najib said after a 90-minute bilateral meeting with his Turkish counterpart at Perdana Putra here yesterday.

Malaysia and Turkey started negotiations on the FTA in 2010 and since then, seven rounds of talks have been held.

Najib said both countries had also signed a strategic framework agreement to pave the way towards boosting bilateral ties.

"We believe this strategic framework will provide a strong basis for all relevant parties, including members of the government and private sectors of both countries, to try to fulfil the intentions and aims listed in the agreement.

"In the morning discussion, my counterpart (Erdogan) has suggested increasing the total trade between our countries, which is about US$1.5 billion (RM4.8 billion) now, to a much higher level of US$5 billion."

Najib said Khazanah Nasional Bhd, the government's investment arm, had invested US$1.5 billion in Turkey, including US$1.1 billion in the Turkish healthcare industry.

He said Khazanah, through Malaysia Airports Holdings Bhd, would also invest US$300 million to increase its equity to 60 per cent in the second Turkey International Airport project in Istanbul.

The prime minister added that Putrajaya and Ankara were also looking at lifting the visa requirement between the countries and Najib was upbeat it would happen soon.

"A draft agreement has been submitted to the government of Malaysia and the appropriate ministries and agencies will look into it."

Najib said Malaysia and Turkey had also exchanged views on international issues, particularly events in the Middle East and the Muslim world.
"As two countries that have been singled out as models of democracy in the Muslim world, it is incumbent on us to show that we can lead the way, not only in terms of bilateral cooperation but also that Islam and democracy are quite consonant with each other."

Erdogan echoed Najib's view of being role models to other Muslim nations.

"We are two countries that have common and shared religious and cultural values. And as mentioned by our esteemed brother (Najib), we are two countries that are able to demonstrate that Islam and democracy can coexist."

As Malaysia geared towards achieving Vision 2020 and Turkey towards its 2023 objective, Erdogan said it was crucial for both countries to maintain "a high-level contact" in all fields.

Malaysia had become the fifth country to sign such a high-level strategic document with Turkey after China, South Korea, Indonesia and Japan, he said.

The framework outlines possible areas of cooperation, including in trade and investment, defence, tourism, sports and youth, energy, culture and higher education.

International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed expressed confidence that the FTA would boost bilateral trade to US$5 billion within five years.

Bernama quoted him as saying that the FTA would be a platform to scale up business opportunities.

"Turkey and Malaysia are diversified economies. We are strong in electrical and electronics while Turkey is strong in agriculture, textiles, chemicals and metals.

"My view is that these opportunities are underexploited or, in some cases, unexploited."

From January to November last year, trade between the countries amounted to US$996.3 million. Malaysia's exports to Turkey totalled US$814.8 million, while imports amounted to US$181.5 million.
Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak (right) and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan leaving Masjid Putra in Putrajaya after performing Friday prayers yesterday. Bernama pic