

Mbeki to host Egyptian president

Pretoria - South African President Thabo Mbeki will on Tuesday hold bilateral political, economic and trade discussions with his Egyptian counterpart, Hosni Mubarak.

President Mubarak will be in South Africa this week for his first state visit, scheduled from Monday to Wednesday.

President Mbeki will host the Egyptian President with a view to further strengthen and consolidate bilateral political, economic and trade relations between the two countries.

South Africa hopes to build on Egypt's support for the African Agenda, including the promotion of sustainable social and economic development, conflict-prevention, conflict resolution and peacekeeping and greater integration on the continent.

Addressing reporters at the Union Buildings in Pretoria, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Aziz Pahad said it was important to note this was a historic state visit.

"We believe this is a very important visit given the fact that Egypt plays a major role, not only in Africa but as you are aware, in the Middle East and indeed, in the Gulf area."

He said Egypt was not only a key player in the African Union, the United Nations but also in the Arab League, the Organisation of Islamic Unity (OIC) and indeed, will host the Non-Aligned Movement Summit next year.

The Mediterranean Conference was held in France recently, to try to bring about cohesion among the countries of the Mediterranean.

"Egypt also participated in this Summit and the state visit to South Africa will be an important occasion to understand from President Mubarak where this process is expected to go," said Mr Pahad.

He said the visit comes after the recent African Union Summit hosted by Egypt in Sharm El-Sheikh where major decisions were taken on many issues.

"This will be an important opportunity for our two Heads of State and their delegations to review these decisions and to see how we can cooperate to ensure that these decisions are implemented which will also ensure that the African Union is strengthened financially, politically and otherwise."

The African Union government debate will be high on the agenda because this was discussed at the Sharm El-Sheikh Summit.

Mr Pahad said the debate was reaching an important stage and "we will have the opportunity to deliberate on how to take the Sharm El-Sheikh decisions further".

Egypt is currently on the African Union's Peace and Security Council and therefore the conflict situations in Africa will come under discussion.

"Especially the situation in Darfur and the situation in Sudan because of its impact on Egypt," said the minister, adding that South Africa will also seek to understand the status of the Chad, Ethiopian and Djibouti as well as the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflicts.

He said this was important because Egypt brokered the ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel, and is therefore an important player in the Middle East.

It will also again be an opportunity to get a sense from the Egyptian delegation, not only of how the ceasefire agreement is holding but what is the way forward towards achieving the Annapolis agreements towards a two-state solution.

"You cannot also underestimate Egypt's role in dealing with other situations including Iraq and the Iranian nuclear issue that this will also be high on the agenda to understand how we can cooperate in order to bring about stability with regard to these two situations."

Mr Pahad said economic diplomacy will again be prominent in the discussions.

"Our political links have been developing quite strongly in the last 14 years but it is quite clear that our economic relations have not achieved full potential.

"We have also signed the Promotion and Reciprocal Protection of Investments and on Trade which were concluded in 1998," said the minister.

A Memorandum of Understanding on Economic Cooperation is currently under consideration at the moment as well as an Agreement on the Avoidance of Double Taxation entered into force in 1998.

Other agreements include cooperation in the field of tourism, science and technology and air services. An agreement on Maritime Transport will be reviewed later this year.

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