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Dr M offers Malaysian expertise for Lebanon's reconstruction

Farush Khan in Beirut

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has offered Malaysian expertise to Lebanon in the reconstruction of the country after a prolonged civil war.

"We do not know what role we can play in the reconstruction of Lebanon, but I have with me a number of Malaysian businessmen familiar with the economic and physical rehabilitation of a country," he said at the state banquet on the occasion of his official visit to Lebanon yesterday.

The Prime Minister said many of the members of his delegation and their companies had played a key role in the economic transformation of Malaysia.

"We hope they can be given an opportunity to participate in returning Lebanon to its former glory as the premier business centre of West Asia."

He said Lebanese prosperity would not only contribute to the well-being of the region, but also to Malaysian businessmen who wished to trade and interact economically with Lebanon.

"The renowned entrepreneurial spirit of the Lebanese people and their determination to help the country resume its traditional role as a dynamic commercial and cultural centre for the entire region is sufficient for Malaysia to want to participate in its reconstruction. We trust there is excellent scope for our two peoples to work together."

"Our experience convinces us that the concept of partnership through coalition and networking among the various ethnic and religious groups is a key element in building a vibrant and tolerant society," he added.

There could be strength in diversity, but it must be seriously and sincerely nurtured over time, he said.

"We in Malaysia believe in sharing what we have rather than trying to take all for ourselves, only to destroy the prize completely in the process. We are confident the people of Lebanon would want to share what is left rather than destroy everything once again."

This is the first official visit by a Malaysian Prime Minister to Lebanon, which is among the first countries with which Malaysia established diplomatic relations following its independence in 1957.

Malaysia established a trade office in Lebanon's capital, Beirut as early as 1968.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia understood and sympathised with the pain and deprivation that the people of Lebanon had suffered because of the prolonged civil war which was aided and abetted by foreign interests.

"From being one of the world's most sophisticated centres of commerce and culture, it is sad and regrettable that Lebanon has been reduced to a scarred battlefield.

"We are, however, impressed that Lebanon has begun in earnest to rebuild itself and is determined to lay the foundation for durable peace, both at home and in the region."

He congratulated Prime Minister Rafic Hariri for his strong leadership and single-mindedness in leading the Lebanese people in the immense task of reconstruction.

The Prime Minister also spoke on Malaysia's success in tapping the dynamism of its private sector and utilising private capital to serve the national interest.

He said Malaysia believed there could also be a "smart partnership" between governments, nations and regions.

He explained that Malaysia's national policies, whether economic or trade, were designed to "prosper our neighbours" rather than impoverish them.

"Poor neighbours create problems. Rich neighbours make good trading partners."

Perhaps, he said, West Asia would like to experiment with this approach.

Stressing on the need for peace and good neighbourliness, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia simply could not countenance aggression by anyone, whether friend or foe.

"In West Asia, Israel must realise that the threats it perceives are a direct consequence of its own action.

"Any country that forcibly takes over land and property belonging to others, that destroys other people's dwellings to erect its own settlement, cannot be said to be sincere in wanting peace."

Malaysia, he said, fully sympathised with the people of Lebanon as their lands had been taken away from them.

It also supported United Nations resolution 425 and considered its implementation as being the only suitable and acceptable way for the establishment of peace in Lebanon.

(Resolution 425 calls for an unconditional Israeli withdrawal from the strip of land in southern Lebanon that it has occupied since 1978 as a self-declared "security zone" to prevent guerilla attacks on northern Israel.)

The Prime Minister said the current Israeli government must also honour commitments made by the previous government.

"If a new government scuttles solemn undertakings by the previous government, how do you conduct international relations? Peace can only come about with sacrifice," he said.

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