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Iraq looks to KL for assistance

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IRAQ in its efforts to rebuild after a devastating war, is seeking the assistance of Malaysia in various fields, Iraqi Ambassador to Malaysia Mohammed Rifat Al-Ani said.

Speaking to Business Times in Kuala Lumpur, Mohammed said since Malaysia is influential in international forums, it can play an important role in lifting the UN embargo.

"Malaysia is one of the prominent countries in the international community and is active in Asean, the OIC, G-15 and the UN," Mohammed said.

He added there is no justification for the UN to continue the embargo as Iraq has adhered to all the world body's terms, including the international inspection of Iraqi armaments.

"It is time for the US and the UN to lift the embargo as there is no excuse left," he added.

Mohammed also said Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has reiterated opposition to the continued UN-imposed economic sanctions on Iraq.

"Malaysia also opposed the unilateral imposition of the 'no fly zone' by the US and UK to bar the flights of Iraqi warplanes in certain parts of Iraq.

"Other Gulf countries - like Qatar, Oman, UAE, Bahrain - also support the lifting of the embargo. They have been sending food and medicine to Iraq from time to time as a sign of their solidarity."

Mohammed said Malaysia can help Iraq to rebuild its economy. Malaysia has not conducted any trade with Iraq since the UN embargo was imposed.

"Malaysia has expertise in oilfields and we have invited Malaysia's national oil company Petronas to participate in our oil development programme once the sanctions are lifted.

"We are ready to cooperate with Malaysia in the oil industry and we are ready to produce 3 million barrels per day (bpd) once the sanctions are lifted," he added.

Iraq produced 3.3 million bpd before the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. In a humanitarian deal with the UN, Iraq resumed limited oil exports last December 11 which allows Baghdad to export crude oil worth US\$2 billion (US\$1 = RM2.48) every six months.

The money is used to import much-needed food and medicine. At current prices, the amount of oil produced is between 500,000 and 600,000 bpd.

Mohammed said the Iraqis have met Malaysian government officials and have explained that Iraq is ready to expand its economic relations with Malaysia.

"Iraq is a safe place to invest in," he stressed, saying that "the Government is stable and the regime is strong".

"The Iraqi market is very large and in need of so many things," he said and urged Malaysians to have direct links with the market.

The Iraqi envoy invited Malaysian investors to participate in the electronics, telecommunications, food and pharmaceutical products sectors and also the production of other goods.

"The health and food situation in Iraq is critical due to the embargo on Iraq, which has caused several shortages of food and medicine," Mohammed said.

Mohammed said that until 1990, there were significant advances in the

provision of healthcare and major projects resulted in a first-class range of medical facilities in large towns and a series of clinics in rural areas.

"As a result of these improvements, the infant mortality rate declined to about 40 per cent per 1,000 births by the late 1980s. Prior to 1990, there was rising prosperity for the vast majority of the population in Iraq," he explained.

He added that the shortages of basic food are crippling but famine has been staved off by the rationing system, which provides minimum food baskets to Iraqi families.

"The famine was avoided by the widespread availability of Iraqi Government food rations, which provide only about one-third of the food energy and protein availability when compared with the 1987-89 period," he added.

According to the FAO and WHO reports of 1995-96, the situation since 1993 has deteriorated and malnutrition is not only seen at hospitals but affects the general population too.

Water supply and sewage disposal hazards are also prevalent, seriously affecting the health of Iraqis.

For example, the number of typhoid fever cases jumped from 1,812 in 1989 to 26,634 in 1995. Also, there were no reported cases of cholera in 1989 but 1,216 cases were recorded in 1995.

The number of deaths linked to the embargo until November 1996 is 770,166 compared with 27,334 for 1989.