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LEBANON: REBIRTH OF A NATION

Special Report

By: Mokhtar Hussein

BEIRUT: Like most Lebanese, Talal Rahal has so much faith in the future of his country which was devastated by nearly two decades of war.

And he reckons that within the next five years, there would be a new wave of "attack" -- not by enemy fighterjets but by conglomerates.

"We want to bring back the glory to this country," said the 46-year-old taxi driver as he took a slow cruise along the ruined buildings, grim reminders of the air raids and shellings, particularly by Israeli jets, during the war.

Talal talked of a "New Lebanon", a Lebanon that would one day be the envy of many, just like the old days.

As he pointed out to this writer the construction works in Beirut, what was obvious was the massive effort to re-develop the capital's central district as an administrative, recreational and cultural centre amidst the hustle and bustle of the city.

The projects include international-standard hotels and commercial buildings, which were destroyed during the war between 1975 and 1990.

With a quick look at Beirut, one would soon realise that Talal's remarks were not just mere rhetorics or fantasies.

Even Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the architect of new Malaysia who was here for a three-day official visit last month, could see the frantic effort by the Lebanese to rebuild their homeland, once the commercial and cultural hub of the region.

"If you come back in five years, you'll see a new 'war' here," said Talal. "But it's not the kind of war which killed thousands during more than 15 years of civil war...It will be a war between companies," said Talal as he cruised along the infamous "Green Line" separating West and East Beirut during fightings between Muslim and Christian militia.

Solidere, the Lebanese company which is responsible for the financing and execution of all infrastructure works in the central district in downtown Beirut, is expected to complete its task by the turn of the century.

The construction includes roads, tunnels, bridges, public spaces, gardens, utility networks, a transformer substation, as well as landscaping and street finishing. The company will also restore about 265 historic buildings.

This post-war reconstruction is expected to create a general business expansion, with rooms for foreigners. Before the war, some 80,000 foreign families resided in Lebanon and the "new" Lebanon expects to see 100,000 of them.

At a banquet during Dr Mahathir's visit, his Lebanese counterpart, Rafic Hariri, told the Malaysian delegation of officials and top businessmen that his government wanted to encourage Malaysian businessmen to invest in the hotel sector and establish joint industrial projects with Lebanese businessmen.

"Lebanon has recovered its position on the regional and international levels," he said.

To the Lebanese, Malaysia is a rising economic power which could help them rebuild their country.

An economist at the Investment Development Authority of Lebanon (Idal) was quoted in a local daily as saying that "Malaysia serves as an example of how to make industry and agriculture grow together, in addition to trade

and services".

At the end of the visit, a consortium of five Malaysian companies has proposed to develop a US\$65-million five-star hotel cum apartment on a piece of land in the district.

The five shareholders of Premier Equity (Cayman) Ltd are Berjaya Land Berhad, Dijaya Corporation Berhad, Transwater Corporation Berhad, MWE Holdings Berhad and Pernas Holdings Sdn Bhd.

Although ruined, there are glimpses of Beirut's past glory by anyone visiting the city, once billed as one of the most beautiful, bustling, economically successful cities in the world.

Lebanon which shares borders with Syria and Israel has an estimated population of 3.4 million, mostly Muslims.

The country was hit by civil war in the 1970s between Christians and Muslims and their Palestinian allies. It was also been invaded by the Israelis in 1983.

Watching the rapid development in Beirut, perhaps one might ask where did the money come from, for the reconstruction programme in such a short period.

"Many Lebanese left the country to look for fortune and come back with the money," explained Talal.

He said during the early days, Lebanese went to South Africa to seek their their fortune in the gold and diamond mines while some, including Talal, sought a new life in the United States with the hope of returning one day.

"Even (Lebanese Prime Minister) Rafic Hariri did business in the Gulf before coming back to Lebanon," he said.

The potentials in Lebanon are there and many businessmen people are now eyeing the country.

"Opportunities are plenty in Lebanon for Malaysians," said Malaysian Airlines chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli, who led the 20-strong business delegation accompanying Dr Mahathir during the visit.

He said that Malaysian investors should move fast to take up the offers by the Lebanese government if they did not want to be left out.

But some of Malaysian businessmen are still perturbed, primarily over the instability in southern Lebanon which is now being occupied by Israeli troops.

In southern Lebanon, Israeli troops have occasionally shelled certain areas which they claimed to be the hideouts of Hizbollah guerrillas.

"Only in the south, you can hear bombings and shootings. But elsewhere in Lebanon, it is safe," said Talal.

But Tajudin seemed to have a solution. He said that if Malaysian businessmen went in as a group, the risks could be reduced.

"When I first came to Lebanon 15 months ago, I was not confident I had made the right decision, thinking the situation will be chaotic. Now I regret for not taking the initiative earlier, not inviting our businessmen to come along and see the potentials," he said.

A survey by a company keen to invest in Lebanon had suggested that corporations wishing to participate in the Lebanese economy should act immediately and not wait for the peace process to be finalised.

The study also noted that Malaysian goods could be very profitably marketed if the correct approach is taken, and provided that there is relevant support from the appropriate governmental organisations.

In tourism, it proposed that emphasis be given to resort development such as golf courses, riding schools, sporting facilities particularly in the Bekaa Valley, some 20 km east of Beirut.

If Tajudin's words were not good enough, perhaps the Prime Minister's remarks could instil some confidence amongst the Malaysian investors.

"From what I have found here, Lebanon is a good risk for investment,"
said Dr Mahathir at a news conference at the end of his visit. -- BERNAMA
MOK