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Mahathir-Lebanon

MAHATHIR NOW IN LEBANON FOR A THREE-DAY VISIT

By: Mokhtar Hussain

BEIRUT, June 16 (Bernama) -- After attending the inaugural summit of eight Islamic Developing Countries (D-8) in Istanbul yesterday, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today flew into the Lebanese capital for a three-day official visit, the first by a Malaysian prime minister.

Dr Mahathir was met on arrival by his Lebanese counterpart Rafic Hariri and was accorded a welcoming ceremony at the Beirut International airport.

Dr Mahathir was accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. Also accompanying him are Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, Works Minister Datuk Seri S.Samy Vellu and several businessmen.

After the national anthems of both countries were played, Dr Mahathir inspected a guard-of-honour from the Lebanese army.

During his visit, he will call on Hariri before leading the Malaysian side at a delegation meeting.

While here, Dr Mahathir is expected to receive Lebanon's highest award from the Lebanese government, the highest honour to be given to a foreign dignitary.

On Tuesday, Dr Mahathir will visit Solidere, the Lebanese company for the development and reconstruction of the Beirut central district before visiting the city of Sidon which is also the birth place of Hariri.

He is also scheduled to have dialogue with the business community in the republic during a dinner.

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

The country which was once the business centre for West Asia was hit by a civil war in the 1970s between its Christian and Muslim citizens and their Palestinian allies, and is currently rebuilding its economy.

Apart from factional fightings, Lebanon had also been partially occupied by Syrian troops while Israel invaded the country in 1983 and occupied the southern portion of the country.

Although favouring Malaysia, trade between the two countries is small totalling RM16.5 million in the first three month this year. Last year, total trade was RM55.7 million.

Among Malaysia's exports to Lebanon are heating and cooling equipment and parts, tv receivers, fuel for aircraft, rubber product and processed vegetable oils while imports from Lebanon are printed matter and food-processing machines.

Currently, Malaysia Airlines fly twice weekly to Beirut via Dubai while the Lebanese national carrier, the Middle-East Airlines, fly to Kuala Lumpur once a week.

Dr Mahathir will depart for London on June 18. He is scheduled to visit Hungary on June 23. -- BERNAMA

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