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Malaysia hopes to make Bosnia its strategic partner: PM

WITH peace, though fragile, established in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Malaysia is hoping to make the war-torn country its strategic partner in southern Europe.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the small volume of bilateral trade should not be cause for discouragement. The private sectors from both countries should try to enhance bilateral relations by enlarging the scope of cooperation.

"There is scope for it to grow as Bosnia and Herzegovina build a broad industrial base based on its good technological knowhow and highly skilled people," he said at an official dinner in honour of Mr Boro Botic and Mr Haris Silajdzic, co-chairmen of the Council of Ministers, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Malaysia is host to the first official visit to a foreign country by the leaders of the three major ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Dr Mahathir stressed the need for the "fragile peace" that has been established in the Balkan country to be nurtured to become a genuine and durable one.

He said while the Dayton Peace Accord is a good basis to start from, it is not without its shortcomings. A genuine spirit of give-and-take, he added, can help to bring the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina together. It is important also to ensure that the horrors and atrocities seen during the war are not repeated.

"From our own experience in Malaysia, we know that attention has always been paid to the delicate balance of the interests of all the peoples concerned. In our kind of society, the element of a healthy respect for others is vital. Tolerance, compromise, confidence-building, power-sharing, goodwill, cooperation and a good understanding of sensitivities are also important in our political culture.

"Those of us living in plural societies have very little choice but to live together, accommodate and respect each other and cooperate for the benefit of all," he said.

Offering to share Malaysia's own experiences, Dr Mahathir said:

"Malaysia has its own way of managing and overcoming the problems of a plural society. We believe that there has to be judicious use of both legal and moral authority."

But while Malaysia remains committed to assisting Bosnia and Herzegovina where possible, it is also its desire to develop a genuine partnership.

"We are optimistic that with a true commitment towards peace among all parties concerned, the Bosnian economy can be rebuilt and developed, its political structures can be put in place properly and the social fabric strengthened.

"At the same time, the reasonable aspiration of all the various groups can be adequately met and fulfilled. We wish to work with you as you strive towards the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement and the reconstruction of the country," he said.

Malaysia, he added, has again committed US\$12 million (US\$1 = RM2.76) for the 1997 reconstruction programme. The modalities for the disbursement of the funds and projects to be implemented are under discussion.

In this regard, the Prime Minister said Malaysia would like to see more active participation by the private sectors from both countries, not only in those projects identified by Malaysia but also in other projects,

including those funded by others.

Malaysia, he said, can be an important conduit for products from Bosnia and Herzegovina to enter the wider East Asian market. It can certainly be of help in areas such as privatization, trade and investment promotion and economic planning.

"We are willing to share our experience in the development of small- and medium-scale industries and participate in infrastructure development and in the reconstruction of existing facilities and construction of new ones such as airports, highways and power plants.

"Some Malaysian firms also have expertise in projects identified under the auspices of the South East European Cooperative Initiative (SECI)," he said.

In line with these efforts, Dr Mahathir said, Malaysia is keen to work with some other like-minded countries in Bosnia and Herzegovina and have discussed the idea of launching tripartite or quadripartite efforts with a number of these countries.

"We feel that one way to accelerate the pace of reconstruction in Bosnia and Herzegovina is to encourage a synergy of interests among many countries in specific projects.

"Over the years, Malaysian entrepreneurs have gained experience and expertise in many fields. They can share these and their resources with Bosnian entrepreneurs not only in Bosnia but also in Malaysia and in other countries," he added.

On efforts to promote peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia's commitment remains strong as reflected in the continued deployment of the Malaysian contingent serving with the Stabilisation Force (SFOR) and its precursor, IFOR.

Malaysia, he said, shares the view of the international community that peace must be safeguarded, and that there has to be respect for the law.

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