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Malaysia keen to help rebuild Lebanon, says PM

Hardev Kaur in Beirut

BEIRUT, Mon: Malaysia is keen to participate in the reconstruction of Lebanon and there is excellent scope for the peoples of the two countries to work together.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said 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 participate in your reconstruction."

Dr Mahathir said while Malaysians do not know exactly what role they could play in Lebanon's reconstruction, members of the business delegation are familiar with the "economic and physical reconstruction of a country".

In his speech at the state banquet here tonight, Dr Mahathir added that many members of the delegation and their companies have played a key role in the economic transformation of Malaysia. He hopes that they will be given an opportunity to participate in returning Lebanon to its former glory as the premier business centre of West Asia.

The 35-strong Malaysian business delegation accompanying the Prime Minister is led by Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli, chairman and chief executive of Malaysia Airlines. Among the others in the delegation are Tan Sri Azman Hashim, chairman of the Arab Malaysian Group; Tan Sri Nik Mohamed Nik Yaakob, group chief executive of Sime Darby Bhd; Tan Sri Vincent Tan, chairman of Berjaya Group Bhd; Tan Sri Lee Kim Yew, managing director of Country Heights Holdings; and Tan Sri A.P. Arumugam, chairman of Sri Inderajaya (Asia Pacific) Sdn Bhd.

"We know that Lebanese prosperity will not only contribute to the well-being of this region but also to us in Malaysia who wish to trade and interact economically with Lebanon."

Dr Mahathir noted that the country has already accomplished a great deal in rising from the ravages of 17 years of strife and conflict.

"The Lebanese people, I believe, place reconstruction above petty politics. We in Malaysia know very well the need for political stability for a country's development. We are sure that Lebanon will rise again."

Dr Mahathir congratulated his Lebanese counterpart Rafik Hariri for his strong leadership and his single-mindedness in leading the Lebanese people in the immense task of reconstruction.

Hariri also spearheaded the "highly successful Friends of Lebanon Conference" in Washington last December which forged an effective partnership to rebuild the country on the basis of the Lebanese people helping themselves through the private sector, both domestic and foreign.

This approach and model, Dr Mahathir said, has worked well in Malaysia and should help Lebanon to flourish as well. He elaborated on the Malaysia Inc concept which has helped create jobs, accelerate economic growth and speed up the construction of necessary infrastructure.

Malaysia's experience shows 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.

"There can be strength in diversity." But it must be seriously and sincerely nurtured over time. Malaysia believes in sharing what we have rather than trying to take all for ourselves only to destroy the prize completely in the process," Dr Mahathir said.

Malaysia, he added, understands and sympathises with the pains and

deprivation that Lebanon has 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".

Nevertheless, Dr Mahathir said he is impressed that Lebanon has begun in earnest to rebuild and is determined to lay the foundation for durable peace, both at home and in the region.

Dr Mahathir is the first Malaysian Prime Minister to make an official visit to Lebanon. Malaysia has always attached importance to its relations with Lebanon. The 17 years of turmoil have exacted their toll and valuable time has been lost. "Fortunately, it has not diminished our solidarity with the people of Lebanon."

There have been numerous contacts at both official and commercial levels, especially since the early 1960s. Lebanon was among the first countries with which Malaysia established diplomatic relations following Independence in 1957. Malaysia established a trade office in Beirut as early as 1968 - the first such office in this part of the world.

Dr Mahathir was also bestowed Lebanon's highest award called Wissha Al-Akbar, the Grand Cordon of Lebanon, making him the first foreign dignitary to receive the award. He is also only the third recipient of this award, following Lebanese President Elias Hrawi and Prime Minister Hariri.

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