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Move to tap full potential of ties with Egypt

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MALAYSIA'S private sector will be encouraged to explore trade, economic and investment opportunities with Egypt, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says.

Speaking at a banquet he hosted last night for visiting Egyptian Prime Minister Dr Kamal Ahmed El Ganzoury in Kuala Lumpur, the Prime Minister said while bilateral trade has increased over the years, the value is still small and the scope confined to a few products.

There is also insufficient interaction despite all the avenues for cooperation between the two countries.

"Malaysia views Egypt as the ideal trading partner and as an excellent channel for reaching other Arab and African states.

"Undoubtedly, a great deal needs to be done in order to tap the full potential of trade, economic and investment opportunities which have now taken centre stage in our national development plans."

Dr Mahathir said he is encouraged by Egypt's economic reforms and structural adjustments that have produced encouraging results in recent years.

He said Egypt's call for greater foreign investments, moves towards privatization, deregulation and liberalisation affecting the services, banking, manufacturing and information technology sectors, among others, are in consonance with the worldwide trend towards globalisation.

"Our countries have recognised that Islamic countries have the capacity to play a crucial role in creating conditions for global peace and stability.

"This cannot be achieved unless Muslims truly believe in the Islamic brotherhood and cease to use Islam as an excuse for lulling other Muslims and undermining the political stability of Islamic nations.

"Our two countries have always enjoyed close and brotherly relations. We are optimistic that we can work closely with you to further strengthen our political, trade and economic relations."

Malaysia, he said, has always looked to Egypt as a leader of the West Asian/African bloc and attaches high priority to developing close cooperation with it.

"Yet, we have not succeeded in realising the quantum and quality of cooperation that goes with such high regard."

He said it is peculiar that in spite of the long history of people-to-people relations, best exemplified by the thousands of Malaysians who have graduated from Egyptian universities, "this relationship is still stronger in spirit than in substance".

Malaysian students there tend to keep to themselves and Malaysia has not fully benefited because of this tendency, he noted, while calling those who opt for politicking rather than studying "a blot in the good name of the graduates of Egyptian universities". Many graduates have however inspired respect and are now a positive force in Malaysia's economic progress, he said.

Dr Mahathir also said Malaysia will not have any meaningful relations with Israel until the country learns to honour agreements entered into by its legitimate Government.

"The question of Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict escapes solution because of Israeli duplicity and its high-handed ways. It is sad and most regrettable that Israel's actions, which deserve the strongest

condemnation, are being condoned by certain countries.

"Israel deserves every kind of sanction and yet we see sanctions being applied to weak countries for minor breaches of human rights," Dr Mahathir said.

Malaysia, he added, appreciates Egypt's active role in the West Asian peace process, with President Hosni Mubarak's untiring efforts to bring an end to the conflict, despite Israel's intransigence.

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