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First impressions belie potentials of Egypt and Sudan

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KHARTOUM: First impressions last, but they don't count sometimes. Those who accompanied Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on his official visits to Egypt and Sudan last week found out that first impressions belie these countries' true potentials.

Even Dr Mahathir, who is probably the most-travelled prime minister in the world, could not suppress his fascination.

"In Egypt, I was amazed at how green part of the country although it is also a desert. Land, especially along the Nile, is fertile and arable," he said at the end of his visit to Sudan on Friday.

"There is an impression that there is not much you can do here. There is a reluctance to do business here because of the image portrayed by the Western media.

"Eventually, people find out ... all the scary stories about Sudan have no basis. (Civil war and famine) are not widespread as they were made out to be ... the wealth of country has not been fully realised," he added.

Dr Mahathir expressed his satisfaction with the interest shown by businessmen, especially those who followed him to Sudan. Admittedly, the number of businessmen accompanying him this time was small compared with earlier trips, especially before Malaysia felt the effects of the economic and financial crisis in East Asia.

Two Malaysian companies have made inroads into Egypt and Sudan.

Egypt is already a market for Kancils, and Perusahaan Otomobil Kedua Sdn Bhd (Perodua), together with its Saudi partners and Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional (Proton), is looking at initially assembling the Kancil in Cairo and later expanding into manufacturing.

In Sudan, Petronas is the "anchor tenant" south of the country. The national oil company has a 30 per cent stake in Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Co Ltd, which now has 660 million barrels of recoverable oil reserves.

Petronas has been offered other investment opportunities to undertake together with Sudan's national oil company, Sudapet.

Another company, Advanced Synergy Bhd, is setting up a home away from home for Malaysians here. It is rehabilitating the 100-year-old Grand Hotel, which fronts the scenic White Nile.

These companies will not only be making money out of their ventures but they too have proven to be good businessmen in the countries they trade with or invest in.

Through them, Malaysia can realise its "prosper-ty-neighbour" policy outside its own region.

In Sudan, for example, Dr Mahathir pointed out to the businessmen that by participating in the development of the country, "they (Sudanese) will become richer".

"We cannot sell to a poor country. But if we buy from them, they will have the wealth to trade with us. By investing there, we will create wealth there, too."

The Prime Minister took the opportunity to remind Malaysian businessmen of how important it is that they give the people and authorities in their host countries a good impression of Malaysia.

He expressed disappointment with cases in which Malaysian companies signed memorandums of understanding but did not follow up to ensure that they were realised into agreements and projects.

"Far too often, not to my liking, companies signed MOUs and I find out later that these MOUs were not realised. There are also companies, which have been given huge projects in Central Asia and South America, peddling contracts to others," Dr Mahathir said.

He stressed the need for Malaysian businessmen to protect the image of the country overseas. He also reiterated the need for companies to be serious in their endeavours.

It is embarrassing if, having secured a project or contract from a foreign country, a company could not raise enough financing to undertake it. It is equally shameful having to ask the Prime Minister for financial assistance from the Government to undertake the project.

This happened in Sudan during a dialogue between Dr Mahathir and businessmen in the delegation. They were singing the same tune as the Malaysian students who had met the Prime Minister at another dialogue.

While the students asked for scholarships to finance their studies there, the businessmen were seeking financial assistance to undertake projects overseas.

One even asked Dr Mahathir if Petronas could extend soft loans for his company to undertake irrigation programmes for the Sudan Government.

One would think that they would be able to work the problems out without having to seek Dr Mahathir's help.

The Prime Minister advised the company concerned and those facing the same predicament to find a third partner which can finance their participation in their projects.

"Even at home, companies are having problems (to raise financing). In the case of Petronas, we cannot use their money to support companies. They (Petronas) need the money, too, but if they want to (finance projects), they can do so.

"I would suggest cooperation with other countries ... foreign partners with the money. While we can offer technology, the foreign partners can invest the money but we must make sure the project can be beneficial to all parties involved," he said.

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