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KL, Beirut making up for lost time in decades-old friendship

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THE arrival of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri today, marks the year's first official visit by a head of government. This is the second time that Hariri has visited Malaysia, the first being in March 1995.

It would be wrong to assume that this is the start of a relationship between the two countries. In fact Malaysia has the honour of counting Lebanon as one of its oldest friends.

"Lebanon was among the first countries with which Malaysia established diplomatic relations following our Independence.

"Malaysia has from the very beginning, attached importance to its relations with Lebanon. However, some 17 years of war and turmoil has exacted their toll and valuable time has been lost," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said on his official visit to Lebanon in June last year.

Before its civil war, Lebanon was Malaysia's focal point for trade in the Middle East. It was a popular stopover on the way to London for many tourists, businessmen and political leaders including former Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.

The first ever Honorary Consul of Malaysia was appointed in Beirut in 1965. Today, Datuk Omar Jundi continues in the position, making him the most senior and longest serving Consul.

"The first trade office for Malaysia was set up in 1968, again in Beirut. Had it not been for the civil war, we would have had an embassy. Because of the war there was a lull in relations for 17 years," says Omar.

In 1974, Malaysia and Lebanon signed an air services agreement; and again because of the war it was never implemented. When Hariri was last here, he revived the agreement. In January 1996, Malaysia Airlines became the first Asian carrier to fly into Beirut.

Hariri's visit in 1995 was to build on the previously strong relationship between the two countries.

He had brought along a large delegation of businessmen and four ministers from different religious backgrounds - a Shi'ite and Sunni, both Muslims, a Druze and an Armenian Christian.

Lebanon too is multiracial and multireligious. Hariri is impressed with the political situation in Malaysia and wishes to replicate it in his country.

According to Datuk Mohamad T. Ozeir, the Honorary Consul of Lebanon, Hariri and Dr Mahathir have a strong rapport with one another.

"Hariri has the same intentions for Lebanon as Dr Mahathir has for Malaysia. Both of them like development, have high ambitions for their countries and believe that if someone else can do it, so can they," says Ozeir.

Hariri, who is a successful businessman and whose personal worth is estimated at US\$3 billion (about RM11 billion), is credited with the rebuilding and restructuring of his country from the ravages of the war.

He has also restored confidence in Lebanon's economy, and now the country that was once called the "Switzerland of the Middle East" is attempting to regain its former glory, to have once again one of the best financial and banking systems in the world.

According to a Wisma Putra official, it is encouraging that a Prime Minister of a developing country is interested in the happenings in Malaysia and the region. He adds that perhaps both countries can learn

from each other's mistakes and successes.

A Lebanese newspaper, The Daily Star reports that while in Malaysia the Lebanese delegation will study a series of proposals for business joint ventures.

Hariri is also expected to sign an agreement on the exchange of information between the two countries and continue discussions for an agreement on the protection of investments in both countries.

He will give a talk to the Association of Banks and visit the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority to learn more about how Malaysia attracts investors.

Lebanon has a large pool of trained professionals especially in the fields of medicine and engineering and Hariri has offered to extend these expertise to Malaysia.

The country is also known to have the best education system in the Middle East and its five universities are of world standard. Malaysia is considering sending its students there.

"At the moment there are only three Malaysian students in Lebanon. Lebanon also offers scholarships to study there and it is up to Malaysians to pick it up," says Omar.

The entrepreneurial skills of the Lebanese people are well known and respected and are something that Malaysians could pick up.

A Wisma Putra official says Lebanon and Malaysia have always had a relationship that has been purposeful, mutually beneficial and is on equal footing.

"We have been together in the international arena especially in the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference) and the United Nations. The two countries have been the moderating influence among the ummah of the OIC," he says.

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