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Mahathir-Lebanon

MALAYSIA AND LEBANON TO INCREASE COOPERATION

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 9 (Bernama) -- Cooperation between Malaysia and Lebanon is poised to take off as the Prime Ministers of the two countries found common ground in a number of areas following their talks here today.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, emerging from discussions with his counterpart, said Malaysia was interested in participating in the reconstruction of Lebanon, such as in the field of tourism.

War-torn Lebanon has embarked on a massive reconstruction programme following 17 years of civil strife. Beirut, the capital, is also trying to regain its position as the major financial centre of the West Asian region.

"We would like to participate in the reconstruction of Lebanon, for we think there is something to be gained for ourselves from it," he told reporters.

"The tourism industry appears to offer good potential," he added when asked what areas of redevelopment Malaysia was interested in.

Dr Mahathir and Hariri had a four-eyed discussion lasting about two hours at the Prime Minister's office. This was followed by a full delegation meeting lasting another hour, ending with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Information Cooperation by the two Prime Ministers.

Hariri arrived this morning for a two-day official visit, reciprocating Dr Mahathir's trip to Beirut in June last year.

Briefing reporters on the meeting, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the capacity of the Malaysian private sector to invest in Lebanon might be diminished in view of the current economic situation.

"But surely, when the value of the ringgit goes up and when the economy is back to normal, we can invest in Lebanon in many fields," he said.

Abdullah said it was also an opportunity for Hariri to get an insight from Dr Mahathir himself on Malaysian as well as regional efforts to overcome economic problems.

"Hariri was concerned with what has happened and said that Malaysia will always remain a friend of Lebanon," he said.

Abdullah said that Hariri had suggested that the Malaysian and Lebanese central bank governors establish contacts to learn about each other's banking operations.

He said that both leaders wanted to see an expansion in trade activities between Kuala Lumpur and Beirut.

Abdullah said towards this end, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz would visit Lebanon this month which would also possibly see the signing of the agreements on investment guarantee and avoidance of double taxation between the two countries.

In 1990, bilateral trade amounted to RM14 million which increased to RM57 million in 1996.

The foreign minister said Hariri had informed Dr Mahathir that Lebanon and neighbouring Syria had agreed to abolish import duties.

"This is a new market for Malaysia if we can increase the export of our goods there," he said.

Lebanon and Syria have a population of about four million and 20 million respectively.

He said no government in the world was perfect and every sin committed by Southeast Asian governments had been committed in every country which

talked of good government and governance.

On Malaysian-Lebanese ties, Dr Mahathir said both countries were in the process of reconstruction.

"You from the ravages of war and we from the ravages caused by an unprecedented assault on our economy.

"There is much that we have in common and therefore there is much that we can do together. Even weak countries working together can bolster each other's strength.

Adding that both countries were not exactly the weakest economies in the world, the prime minister said he was confident that through friendship and cooperation, the two countries would be able to recover and develop. --

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