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Dr M says his impressions of Sudan have been changed after visit

Syed Nadzri in Khartoum, Sudan

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said his impressions of Sudan have changed.

"There has been tremendous progress in Sudan. I have come here for the first time and what I have seen has changed my past impressions of this country," he said in an impromptu speech after receiving an honorary Doctorate of Law from the University of Khartoum at a ceremony last night.

Dr Mahathir said even the International Monetary Fund had acknowledged the progress made by Sudan.

"(IMF managing director) Michel Camdessus told me the IMF was impressed with the achievements of Sudan," said Dr Mahathir, who spoke at an outdoor ceremony held on the university's grounds.

He said he had great respect for Sudan which, like Malaysia, is predominantly Muslim, multi-racial, multi-religious and practises religious tolerance.

"I have seen churches here alongside with mosques. This is the greatness of Islam which teaches Muslims to respect the religions of others."

"The propoganda that there is religious intolerance in Sudan is one of the many untruths I am discovering here," said Dr Mahathir, who earlier held talks with President Hassan Ahmed Al Bashir at the Republican Palace.

President Bashir set aside protocol to personally greet the Prime Minister upon his arrival at the Khartoum International Airport yesterday from Cairo where he attended the just-concluded summit meeting of Group of 15 developing countries.

From the airport, the Sudanese head of state, an army general who came to power after a coup in 1989, also personally "ushered" Dr Mahathir to his suite at the Khartoum Hilton, where the Prime Minister's entourage is staying.

Dr Mahathir began his second day in Sudan today by meeting First Vice President Ali Osman Mohamad Taha, and later with President of the National Assembly (Parliament) and Secretary of the National Congress Hassan Al Turabi.

Dr Mahathir then met another key figure in the Sudanese government, Dr Riak Machar, who is chairman of the Southern Co-ordination Council.

Dr Machar for many years was declared Sudan's "Public Enemy Number One" when he led a rebel faction in the South Sudan, is now an Assistant to the Sudanese President after the signing a peace agreement ending four decades of civil war in the country.

The agreement grants South Sudan the right to self-determination, to be exercised through the internationally-observed referendum before the end of four-year interim government.

"Now the reasons for war no longer hold and we are resolving our problems through dialogue and negotiations. With peace prevailing in Sudan, democracy shall thrive, respects for human rights and freedom shall be the norm."

"Sudan is vast and borders nine countries and its stability is vital for regional peace in Africa and the Middle East," Dr Machar said in a recent interview with the Sudanese magazine, Sudanow.

Later today, Dr Mahathir will be interviewed by the local official media before meeting some 60 Malaysian students here pursuing mostly Islamic studies.

In the evening, he will hold a dialogue with Sudanese intellectuals,

scholars and parliamentarians and speak at a dinner hosted by the Sudanese Federation of Employers.

Meanwhile, the Khartoum Hilton on the bank of the Blue Nile, the city's only international-class hotel, is holding a two-week Malaysian food festival to take advantage of the presence of many Malaysians, including businessmen accompanying the Prime Minister.

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