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Sudan (News Analysis)

DISCOVERING SUDAN AND THE MALAYSIAN CONNECTION

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KHARTOUM, May 17 (Bernama) -- To the outside world, Sudan is very much of an enigma.

Impressions about this central African nation have largely revolved round its protracted civil war that threatens to destroy the country on a North-South basis.

Apart from that, not much is known, or for the international television networks, not much is worth reporting except perhaps for famine that now and then occurs in one small corner of this largest country of Africa and 11 times the size of Britain.

And the United States, not counting Sudan as one of those that could serve its "strategic interests", added to this perceived sense of Sudanese Isolationism by imposing trade sanctions because of what one Sudanese minister described as "dubious charges of harbouring terrorists".

Even the fact that Sudan too is home of the pyramids, where kings that ruled thousands of years ago were entombed, did not arouse international interest, in contrast to the pyramids in neighbouring Egypt which made the list of the so-called Seven Wonders of the World.

But for Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, his visit to Sudan has been like discovering a country in which he has heard so many "scarry" stories.

"I'm quite surprised at the difference between the descriptions that I have heard and read from the international media. Sudan is peaceful, I don't see people dying of starvation and the problems of the country are being resolved very well," said Dr Mahathir before ending his three-day visit Friday.

"It's not as bad as what the CNN and the BBC have made it out to be," he said, as Sudanese President Omar Hassan Ahmed El Bashir, who also attended the joint press conference, smiled and nodded in approval.

Dr Mahathir, who matches words with action in his untiring efforts for South-South cooperation, gave the Sudanese government full marks for opening up the country especially to foreign investors.

He has rather quietly and within just a few years, made Malaysia the second largest foreign investor in Sudan after China, with investments in its oil industry, as well as tourism, that is soon to change the face of this country of 28 million people.

Petronas, Malaysia's national oil corporation, has within just the last two years, injected US\$200 million into Sudan's economy in a joint-venture project with three other parties to develop its oil fields.

Recoverable oil reserves of up to 660 million barrels have been discovered and the reserves are expected to increase by another 600 million barrels.

Based on its 30 per cent stake in the venture, which is expected to deliver Sudan's first oil exports in June next year, Petronas will add over 370,000 barrels to Malaysia's oil reserves.

Petronas President and Chief Executive Tan Sri Hassan Marican, upbeat about the company hitting a bulls-eye in Sudan within just a short time, told Malaysian journalists that it would pump another US\$400 million into the project.

Petronas engineers and other workers, along with those from project partners China National Petroleum Corporation, Canada's State Petroleum Corporation and Sudapet, the national oil company of Sudan, are involved in

laying a 1,500km pipeline across deserts to Port Sudan in the Red Sea, where the oil exports will be loaded.

Sudan's Western-trained Minister of Information and Culture Dr Ghazi Salahuddin, described Dr Mahathir's visit as of extraordinary significance for his country, given the Malaysian premier's international standing and clout.

"Dr Mahathir is the most well-known foreign leader to the Sudanese people. His brave and inspiring speeches are widely reported especially by radio stations in this country. His visit has been a great honour for the entire Sudanese people," he told Malaysian journalists who called on him at his home here yesterday.

Dr Mahathir is bullish about Sudan and spoke several times about Malaysia sourcing agricultural products especially its high quality beef and fruits from this country. And businessmen following him on this trip are working out some deals as well as participation in other sectors of the economy.

As Dr Salahuddin put it, Sudan is one of the world's agricultural giants and the Blue Nile and White Nile meet in Khartoum. Besides, Sudan is an unparalleled position of having borders with nine other African countries, giving it a strategic access for Malaysian goods to this big continent.

There's bright sparks emerging on the international front for Sudan, said Dr Salahuddin, 48, who like Dr Mahathir, is a medical doctor by training.

Trained in Surrey, England, he is a former foreign minister and until recently held the powerful post of Secretary-General of the ruling National Congress.

He said Sudan's problems with the US were being resolved through an ongoing dialogue.

"We want a productive relationship with the US. The only problem is that of attitude. Because the US system is a very open one, its foreign policy towards another country is often influenced by some minority views and views from some extremist lobbies," he said.

Asked to elaborate, he said Washington had accused Khartoum of giving sanctuary to the Mujahideens, for example, but these were the very people the US befriended when the former Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan.

According to Dr Salahuddin, Sudan is actually one of the safest countries to be in, its people very friendly and he attributed this largely to the introduction of Islamic law in 1991.

He cited the consumption of alcohol as an example of how Sudan applies Islamic Law in a country where 75 per cent of the people are Muslims, the others being Christians and animists.

"Because the consumption of alcohol is allowed by Christianity, it's not an offence among Christians. But in the case of stealing or mugging, it's an offence under all religions. So we have that kind of flexibility."

"In Sudan, muggings against foreigners are non-existent," he said.

But now Sudan is on the threshold of lasting peace with a Peace Agreement signed last year to end the civil conflict and a new Constitution in place that guarantees freedom and democracy, including a multiparty election.

"Dr Mahathir's visit is very timely. It gives Sudan added credibility and when the new Constitution is in place next month, you'll begin to see a new Sudan," said a confident Dr Salahuddin.

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