

07/04/2000

Hariri to propose MSC concept in Lebanon

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - His visit to this country may be short, but the idea former Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri plans to bring back with him will probably leave a lasting impact on the future of his country and people.

Hariri, who ended his two-day visit to Malaysia today, has decided to propose the establishment of the Multimedia Super Corridor concept in Lebanon.

"I found the MSC concept most fascinating," he said during an exclusive interview with the New Straits Times the night prior to his departure home.

Arriving here on Tuesday evening, he had a tight schedule yesterday, visiting Cyberjaya and calling on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at his office in Putrajaya.

At Cyberjaya, one of the two intelligent cities within Malaysia's MSC, he had talks with top MSC officials.

The MSC, a 750 sq km area stretching from the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) here to the KL International Airport in Sepang, has been designated as a hub for the development of multimedia products and services.

Astute leader and veteran politician that he is, it did not take long for Hariri to realise the significance of projects such as the MSC.

"I see it as Malaysia's big step into the 21st century," was how he described it after a comprehensive briefing by top officials on the project.

"I am very impressed with your MSC project and I am going to lobby for a similar project in Lebanon."

Hariri was Lebanon's prime minister from October 1992 to November 1998 after which he was succeeded by Salim Hoss.

He is now a Member of Parliament and leader of the National Decision bloc and the chairman of the Hariri Foundation.

For Hariri, the MSC is a "fascinating project" because it has every essential component of the information age and encourages investments from international companies.

"Malaysia was a commodity provider about 20 years ago and is now an internet provider."

Determined to see that his people learn from Information Technology as much as possible, Hariri wasted no time in inviting MSC executive chairman Tan Sri Dr Othman Yeop Abdullah to Lebanon to share his experience in the field.

He also plans to send 20 post-graduate students under the Hariri Foundation to study IT at the MSC.

The foundation, which started 20 years ago with the aim of putting Lebanese children through school, has 32,000 students studying in America, France, England and Lebanon.

On his meeting with Dr Mahathir, Hariri said they discussed ways to encourage private investments between the two countries. They also discussed the peace process in the Middle East, especially on the withdrawal of Israel from South Lebanon.

"Dr Mahathir follows the developments in the Arab world very carefully because he is a man of peace and he is always supporting the peace process and the withdrawal of Israel from all Arab occupied territories, especially Lebanon and Syria," he said.

The two leaders had also met when Dr Mahathir led an entourage to Lebanon in June 1997 when members in the group discussed the implementation of possible projects by Malaysian businessmen in that country, such as roads and those which were tourism-related.

These projects, however, did not extend beyond the negotiating table after Malaysia, like many other Asean countries, was hit by the economic problem.

Today, with Malaysia's economy improving, Hariri is hopeful that the proposed projects will resume.

He also believes that with Malaysia's economy picking up, there would be lots of opportunity in store for Lebanese and Arab businessmen in this country.

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