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Iraq-Mission

IRAQ GRATEFUL TO MALAYSIA'S PEACE MISSION

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y: Ahmad Zukiman Zain

ON BOARD MALAYSIA AIRLINES FLIGHT MH4803, June 17 (Bernama) -- Iraq paid tribute to Malaysia's historic peace and friendship mission to Baghdad in support of its people who are reeling from more than a decade-old United Nations sanctions.

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein told Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar during their meeting in Baghdad yesterday that the Malaysian humanitarian effort would always be remembered as a sincere gesture from a brotherly country.

"I think they were taken by surprise with the sincerity shown...he started off by saying that he wanted me to inform each and everyone in the Malaysian delegation of their deep appreciation of the trip and their gratefulness to the government," Syed Hamid told journalists on the chartered flight home from the three-day visit early today.

The message was later relayed by Captain Mohamed Nawawi Awang, Malaysia Airlines (MAS) vice-president of flight operations, who was piloting the plane, to the 260 passengers through the public address system. Most of them responded with a warm applause.

During the courtesy call on the Iraqi president, Syed Hamid handed over a letter of good wishes from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Saddam.

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, who is acting Foreign Minister, and the Iraqi Ambassador to Malaysia Adnan Malik Al-Ghazali were present during the 90-minute meeting.

"The prime minister's letter to Saddam expresses the government's and the people's sympathy to the suffering of the Iraqi people in facing the sanctions," said Syed Hamid.

It also highlighted Malaysia's desire to do everything possible to assist them to alleviate the sufferings and promised to cooperate with Iraq in getting the sanctions lifted.

The economic sanctions were imposed on Iraq after it invaded neighbouring Kuwait in 1990.

The UN Security Council is currently deliberating a proposal by Britain, with United States backing, to push through a revised form of the economic sanctions.

The so-called "smart sanctions" would ease bans on civilian trade with Iraq while tightening a weapons ban and draw up a list of items that could have military uses for the council's approval.

The US-British plan is a revision of the oil-for-food programme in operation since 1996, allowing Iraq to sell oil and order food, medicine and other goods under UN supervision. The US and Britain hope to complete negotiations by July 3.

Syed Hamid said the visit was never planned to coincide with the ongoing debate at the United Nations Security Council on the smart sanctions.

"As far as Malaysia is concerned, we have always taken the view that sanctions should not be continued as it has caused a lot of sufferings, injustice and the future generation in Iraq is affected," he said.

Asked whether Saddam had stated his mind on the proposed smart sanctions during the meeting, Syed Hamid said: "I think he felt the smart sanctions is not smart after all because it will never be accepted.

"They consider the (existing) sanctions as unjustified and the proposed

smart sanctions is going to worsen their position," he said.

Meanwhile, Adnan told Bernama that the mission was significant because of its size and diversity of the delegation representing various sectors of the Malaysian population.

"The way the mission was warmly received in Baghdad shows how grateful the Iraqi people are to Malaysia...Malaysia is not only supporting them verbally but translating the support into action," said Adnan who followed the trip.

Apart from senior government officials, members of the delegation were drawn from the private sector, non-governmental organisations, medical students and media representatives.

Syed Hamid thanked the private sector for supporting the government's initiative to mount the humanitarian flight. A total of RM1.2 million was donated by the private sector for the mission.

The eight-hour flight home took a different route after the journey to Baghdad encountered "difficulties".

Malaysia had notified the UN Security Council of the mission to Baghdad, following which all the countries along the route gave their permission for the plane to pass through.

"But as we were in the air and were approaching certain countries, there were some refusal for us to pass through their airspace," said Syed Hamid of the journey on Wednesday.

After some negotiations, the plane was eventually allowed to fly direct to Baghdad through another country.

"I would not want to name the countries (which did not allow the plane to fly through their airspace) but the most important thing is we were able to resolve the problem and reach Baghdad," he added.

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