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Mission accomplished (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - The historic four-day Peace and Friendship Mission to Iraq ended last night on a very successful note, with President Saddam Hussein expressing appreciation of the solidarity demonstrated by the Malaysian people.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, who led the 300-strong delegation, told a Press conference on board the Malaysia Airlines chartered flight MH8403 that the mission had accomplished its objectives.

The Press conference to local Pressmen accompanying the trip was given about five hours before the 747 Boeing aircraft touched down at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang at 1.40am today.

Syed Hamid's courtesy call on Saddam at his palace in Baghdad, the capital city, which was the highlight of the mission, was itself historic.

Saddam normally does not easily meet other leaders and such meetings are approved only at the last minute.

The meeting between Syed Hamid and Saddam lasted 1 1/2 hours during which the former handed over a letter from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the Iraqi President.

In the letter, Dr Mahathir expressed Malaysia's sympathy with the suffering of the Iraqi people and the desire to help alleviate their problems and to get the 10-year-old sanctions against Iraq lifted.

The people of the oil-rich country which has a population of 25 million suffer from the effects of the sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council a year after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.

The sanctions were imposed as punishment for the invasion.

They forbid Iraq from importing and exporting goods.

The nine-hour flight to Baghdad on Wednesday went through smoothly, except for a detour, forced by the reluctance of certain countries to allow the aircraft to fly over their airspace.

There are two no-fly zones imposed on Iraq. One is in the north above the 36th parallel and the other in the south from Iraq's borders with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Jordan to the 33rd parallel, ending just about 50km outside Baghdad.

The zones were imposed in 1991 after the Gulf War and are patrolled by Western aircraft, mainly the United States and the United Kingdom.

The northern zone was established to protect the largely Kurdish population there from attack by Iraqi forces.

The southern zone is to protect Shi'ite Muslims there who mounted a failed rebellion against Saddam soon after the Gulf War ended.

Syed Hamid said during the meeting, Saddam said he was fully aware that Malaysia was a stable country and that the Government and its leadership were always with the people.

The President felt Malaysia had taken the right move in sending the peace mission and hoped this would be followed with Malaysian businessmen and agencies investing in his country.

Iraq also wanted to buy palm oil directly from Malaysia instead of third countries as at present and also to send its students here for training in Information Technology-related matters. Saddam also felt Malaysia was a brotherly country and was sincere in calling for the lifting of the sanctions against Iraq.

He is keeping abreast with Dr Mahathir's views, giving particular attention to the Prime Minister's voice against the sanctions and

developments in developing countries.

Saddam realised that Malaysia could play an important role in Iraq's economy and had therefore invited Malaysians "with an open arm" to invest in the country.

Saddam had also told Syed Hamid that Iraq would never bow to any pressure, including those under the so-called "smart sanctions".

These "smart sanctions" were proposed by Britain on May 17 with US backing, in a bid to counter criticism of the decade-old UN economic sanctions.

The 15-member Security Council, currently divided on the proposal, is expected to vote on it early July.

Iraq has rejected the proposal, maintaining its call for a complete lifting of sanctions.

Iraq also made good on its threat to take its oil off the world market. On June 4 it suspended most of its oil exports in protest, resulting in the increase in crude oil prices.

According to Saddam, no matter what they were called, sanctions were repressive and a violation of justice.

Among those in the delegation were Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim, Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Wira Mohd Ali Rustam, Deputy Health Minister Datuk Sulaiman Mohamad and Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Samsuddin Osman.

MPs, doctors, medical students, government officials, businessmen, academicians and representatives from non-governmental organisations and the media were also among those in the delegation.

At a dinner on Friday, Shahidan represented the Yayasan Iktisas Islam Malaysia, of which he is the chairman, in handing over assistance of US\$1,300 (RM4,940) to Malaysian students in Iraq and another US\$2,100 to Malaysian medical students there.

Syed Hamid thanked every one in the delegation, especially the private sector for their financial support in making the trip possible and the MAS pilots and crew for an excellent job done.

Among others, they visited patients at the under-equipped Saddam Central Hospital, suffering from serious illnesses such as cancer due to effects of the bombings.

They visited the Amiriya Shelter, also in Baghdad, where 408 of 422 people, who were taking refuge, were killed by US missiles in February 1991. One hundred of those killed were children.

The Gulf War resulted in thousands of people, mostly children, dying of diseases from lack of medical equipment, supplies, trained nurses and specialists to help treat them.

Representatives of the delegation also met Iraqi Vice-President Taha Yassin Ramadan, Deputy Prime Minister and acting Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz and some other Ministers.

On Wednesday, Dr Mahathir and Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali were at the Bunga Raya lounge in KLIA to see them off to Baghdad.

The visit followed a earlier "goodwill mission" to Iraq led by Dr Siti Hasmah in March.

The mission was purely humanitarian and intended to help, especially the aged, sick and children who are suffering due to a lack of medical facilities following the sanctions.