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Syed Hamid leads 300-member humanitarian mission to Iraq

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - A 300-strong delegation led by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar left on a peace and friendship mission to Iraq today.

The delegation was sent off by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali at the Bunga Raya lounge at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang.

Syed Hamid said the initiative was mooted following an earlier "goodwill mission" to Iraq led by Dr Siti Hasmah in March this year.

Others in the delegation include Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Mohd Wira Ali Rustam and Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim.

"This mission is purely on humanitarian grounds to help, especially the aged, sick and children who are suffering due to a lack of medical facilities following the United Nations sanctions imposed on Iraq," Syed Hamid said.

Among the members of the delegation are doctors, government officials, Members of Parliament, businessmen and representatives from non-governmental organisations and the media.

He said the delegation would also meet with Iraqi leaders to strengthen bilateral ties as well as distribute food and other items worth thousands of ringgit.

He also said that Malaysia hoped that some day there could be civilian flights to Iraq.

On whether Malaysia would be sending any negotiators to assist in the Philippine hostage situation, Syed Hamid said:

"We must understand that this is an internal matter and we do not get involved in domestic conflicts," he said.

He said this was a long held principle in Asean and also Malaysia's foreign policy.

"Unless there is an official request and they (Philippines) feel that we can assist, then we will be ever willing to do so. However, to date, there has been nothing official from them."

He said Malaysian ambassador to the Philippines Mohd Arshad M. Hussin had met Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo yesterday and she had said that they were able to handle the situation their own way.

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