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`Time for dialogue with the West'

Deborah Loh

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Iranian President Mohammad Khatami said the time has come for a dialogue between the Islamic world and the West which is facing a spiritual and ethical crisis.

The reformist leader said conditions were ripe as the West, after 400 years of modernity, had reached a point where there was an absence of ethics and spirituality.

"This is a very important historical stage to conduct a dialogue between the Islamic world and the West," Khatami said at a Press conference today.

Speaking through an interpreter, Khatami also said world opinion about the US military-oriented policy against terrorism and support for Israel would gradually change.

"Even the American people themselves will ask, why should we spend so much on a small Government like Israel?"

He said Iran would have no problems with the US, provided the superpower reviewed its policies against them.

"They must stop using the language of threat," he said.

On his struggle to implement reforms in Iran, Khatami said his plans had twice been endorsed by the people through elections.

Khatami, who held bilateral talks with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday, said he agreed with most of Dr Mahathir's views on problems of Muslim unity, and urged Islamic countries to ignore their differences in favour of common interests.

He said the Organisation of Islamic Conference could also help establish a common Islamic market and a united currency.

On Iran-Malaysia ties, Khatami said they were good and hoped that both countries would complement each other in exchanging economic and cultural benefits, as well as creating a broader unity among nations.

Speaking at a luncheon talk with Malaysian and Iranian businessmen jointly organised by the Asian Strategic and Leadership Institute, National Chamber of Commerce and Industry Malaysia (NCCIM) and Malaysia External Trade Development Corp, he proposed the establishment of a "Trans-Asia Information Technology Initiative" to harness and broaden the IT market.

He said Iran was seeking Malaysia's expertise in the creation of a broad IT market.

"The recent move by Iran to make full and comprehensive use of information, communications technology will pave the ground for expanding co-operation between our two countries.

"In the light of such valuable potentials, and considering the very exceptional geographic position of our two countries being at the opposite ends of the continent, I would like to suggest a joint collaboration called the Trans-Asia IT Initiative," he said.

He also praised Malaysia for taking giant steps in the direction of sustainable development and economic prosperity by reducing the distance between itself and the advanced industrial countries at a considerable speed.

Later, Khatami and Dr Mahathir witnessed the signing of a joint co-operation agreement and a memorandum of understanding to set up an Iran-Malaysia Business Council and Malaysia-Iran Business Council between the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Mines, and the NCCIM.

At the signing, Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Mines was

represented by its deputy president, Fereidoon Entezari, while NCCIM by its president, Datuk Seri Abdul Rahman Maidin.

At a public forum later, Khatami said there was a need for Governments to listen to the cries of their people.

A Government which failed to do so, he added, would pay a high price for it.

"Democracy is a necessity for all Islamic countries," he said, in response to a question from the floor.

He had earlier given a talk on Dialogue Among Civilisations and its Challenges.

Khatami urged scholars and intellectuals to "make politicians succumb to the logic of peace and the right to a decent life for the people".

He also said that Muslims must be strong, adding that "strength is not enough if it is not at the service of the people".

"Islamic countries need might and sovereignty and power that care for the people," he said.