

24 NOV 2002

Mahathir-Paris

DR MAHATHIR AND CHIRAC MEET TO DISCUSS WIDE-RANGING ISSUES

By: Wan A.Hulaimi

PARIS, Nov 24 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad ended his busy day here yesterday with a meeting at the Elysee Palace with French President Jacques Chirac who he said was now "less pessimistic" about the situation in Iraq.

They had wide-ranging discussion on issues including Palestinian, globalisation and bilateral relations.

The private meeting, which ended with Chirac offering a "buka puasa" meal of dates and French pastries at the Palace, rounded-up a hectic day which started with a Paris II meeting of 18 nations and five financial agencies on economic aid for Lebanon's recovery.

Dr Mahathir did not elaborate on the French President's call for lessening pessimism on Iraq in his short meeting with Malaysian journalists before leaving for London enroute home.

Chirac alone among western leaders stood up at the NATO Summit in Prague last week with his view that "there cannot be an exclusively military response to terrorism".

He would have expressed the same views to Dr Mahathir and also his believed in the role of the United Nations in settling the present dispute with so-called 'rogue nations'.

The meeting took place when relations between Malaysia and France remained high with France offering three more flights to MAS to Paris from three to six flights a week in the New Year.

Dr Mahathir, who was at the Paris II meeting at the personal invitation of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri had earlier pledged Malaysia's direct loan of US\$300 million (RM1.14 billion) to aid Lebanon reconstruction programme.

Hariri expressed his gratitude by saying that Dr Mahathir's presence was 'historic' and greatly appreciated by his country not only for the cash contribution but also for his importance as a leader of the Muslim world.

The meeting raised US\$5 billion (RM19 billion) as targetted by Lebanon, which has a debt burden of some US\$50 billion (RM190 billion).

Saudi Arabia offered the largest contribution of US\$700 million (RM2.6 billion), France (alone among European countries) US\$500 million (RM1.9 billion) and Malaysia and other Gulf states putting up a total cash contribution of US\$4 billion (RM15.2 billion). The remaining US\$1 billion (RM3.8 billion) was pledged by the countries in technical aid.

Dr Mahathir also said that Malaysia would look into the possibility of extending aid to Lebanon especially in IT development and tourism.

From Paris, Dr Mahathir goes to London where he will be making an informal visit at a handicraft exhibition organised by the Malaysian trade office.

-- BERNAMA

WAH AZZ ABG