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East Timor urged to play active role

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PUTRAJAYA, Mon. - East Timor must play an active role in maintaining peace, creating economic partnerships and increasing cross-cultural understanding in the Southeast Asian region, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight.

He said such an engagement was possible and necessary in the interests of the region.

"As part of Southeast Asia, your country will play an important role in ensuring the continued development, peace and stability of this region.

"As developing countries, we in this region must foster closer co-operation to collectively ensure that our interests are taken into account," he said in his welcoming remarks at the official dinner in honour of visiting East Timor Prime Minister Dr Mari Bim Amude Alkatiri at Seri Perdana here.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would continue to assist East Timor in whatever way possible because a stable and prosperous East Timor was an asset to the region.

He said Kuala Lumpur had been playing an active role in East Timor way before it achieved independence on May 20.

"I am happy to note that co-operation and relations between East Timor and Malaysia have been and will continue to be strengthened. Malaysia was among the first to set up a liaison office in Dili in April 2000 in our efforts to foster closer co-operation and relations with East Timor.

"We have since upgraded the liaison office to a full-fledged embassy on May 20 in conjunction with your independence," Dr Mahathir said.

Welcoming the establishment of an East Timor embassy here, Dr Mahathir said as a newly-independent nation, the real challenge had just begun as they would have to develop their nation after struggling hard for freedom.

"Be assured that Malaysia's commitment to develop close and mutually beneficial relations with your country will continue."

The Prime Minister said though bilateral trade was not very impressive at the moment, both nations must strive to develop the potential.

"On our part, Malaysia will continue to encourage its private sector to go to East Timor and see the opportunities available."

Among the areas being explored are petroleum and gas, infrastructure development, banking, insurance, agriculture and healthcare.

Touching on Malaysia's New Economic Policy and the National Development Policy, Dr Mahathir told Dr Mari that one of the vital responsibilities of his government was to ensure an equitable distribution of wealth.

"With the right policies and right support, I believe that your country can develop and prosper," he added.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir also welcomed East Timor President Xanana Gusmao's intention to visit Malaysia.

"Malaysia welcomes the intention of President Gusmao to visit Malaysia and we look forward to receiving him in the near future. I, too, plan to visit your country at the end of this year," he announced.