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Dr Mahathir assures East Timor counterpart of continued assistance

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PUTRAJAYA, Mon. - Malaysia will continue to help East Timor in its socio-economic development and other related nation-building initiatives such as education, health care and the training of its police, armed forces and diplomatic corps.

Kuala Lumpur has also given an undertaking to enhance trade and investment with the newly-independent nation of 800,000 people, particularly in the exploitation of natural resources.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad gave the assurance in an hour-long meeting with his East Timor counterpart Dr Mari Bim Amude Alkatiri at his office today.

Dr Mari is leading a 27-member delegation on a five-day working visit to Malaysia, his first official visit since assuming the post on May 20.

Briefing the media after the meeting this morning, Deputy Foreign Minister Datuk Dr Leo Michael Toyad said East Timor regarded Malaysia as the best model for development planning and resource management.

"They appreciate all the assistance and aid that we have rendered to them and we are requested to play a more active role in developing their country.

"Apart from extending an open invitation to us to invest there, Dr Mari is also very keen to emulate our development framework and policies," Dr Toyad said.

He said that East Timor was also seeking Kuala Lumpur's support for it to be included in the Asean Regional Forum and as an observer in Asean.

"We are open to the idea of them becoming observers in Asean. This must, however, be discussed among Asean members."

Bilateral trade and investment between both nations were still minimal but East Timor was very keen to have Malaysia as one of its leading business partners, especially in the gas and petroleum sector.

Dr Toyad said Petronas, which had been rendering technical and technological assistance to the East Timor Government, had been invited to invest and develop the industries there.

"If possible they want Petronas to plan and establish the structure of their own national oil company," he said, adding that other sectors of co-operation were agriculture, healthcare and education.

Kuala Lumpur will also continue to train East Timor's students, administrators and diplomatic officers via the Malaysian Technical Co-operation Programme.

Selected officials have started their courses and training programmes at the National Public Administration Institute and the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

Toyad said East Timor's prison officials and fire-fighters would also be trained here.

In a 1999 referendum, East Timor, voted to secede from Indonesia which annexed it on July 16, 1976.

The United Nations Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET) governed the territory from 1999 until it declared independence on May 20, 2002.

Dili is its capital and largest city with a population of 65,000, while the country's economy is primarily reliant on fishing and agriculture.