PM in Lebanon for two-day visit

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BEIRUT: Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrived here yesterday with a high-powered delegation of ministers, top government officials and corporate leaders for a two-day working visit, seen as reflecting Malaysia's further commitment to helping in the reconstruction of Lebanon.

The Prime Minister had during his first official visit here in 1997 offered to help Lebanon in its national reconciliation and economic recovery efforts, and this was followed by a recent announcement of a US$300mil (RM1.14bil) concessionary loan to the country, which had been ravaged by wars for several years until 1990.

Malaysia's offer was reported to have made it the third-largest loan contributor after Saudi Arabia and France.

Dr Mahathir's delegation included his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Syed Jaafar Albar, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, and Energy, Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Amar Leo Moggie, Finance Ministry secretary-general Tan Sri Dr Samsuddin Hitam and Bank Negara governor Tan Sri Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz.

The corporate leaders on the trip included Petronas president and chief executive Tan Sri Mohd Hassan Marican, RHB chairman Tan Sri Rashid Hussain, Usaha Tegas Group of Companies chairman Ananda Krishnan, businessman Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Al Bukhary and Telekom Malaysia chief executive Datuk Dr Khir Abdul Rahman.

Soon after arrival, Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah were personally driven by his Lebanese counterpart, Rafic Hariri, to Koraytem Palace, where they had a private luncheon.

The two leaders later met at the Grand Serail, Hariri's office, for a four-eyed exchange of views, and witnessed the signing of an agreement on avoidance of double taxation and a memorandum of understanding on a water and wastewater project.

Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah then made a courtesy call on President Emile Lahoud at the Presidential Palace, Baabda, where the Prime Minister was bestowed the National Order of the Cédar (Grand Cordon).

Later, Lahoud hosted a dinner in honour of Dr Mahathir.

Today, Dr Mahathir will be taken on a guided tour of the city centre, including a visit to the marina.

He will later go to Parliament House where he will call on Speaker of the House Nabih Berry.

He will then attend a luncheon hosted by Hariri and later an Islamic Business Council (IBC) dialogue at the Koraytem Palace.

The IBC, structured along the lines of the World Economic Forum, comprises prominent business representatives from Muslim countries aimed at enhancing economic and business relations among Islamic countries. •

Dr Mahathir will later leave for Cairo on another working visit.