

17 AUG 2003

Mahathir-Assad

DR MAHATHIR HOLDS TALKS WITH PRESIDENT ASSAD

By: Mokhtar Hussain

DAMASCUS, Aug 17 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who arrived here this morning on a mission to promote South-South cooperation, met President Dr Bashar Al-Assad this afternoon.

The two Muslim leaders had a four-eye meeting at the People's Palace which lasted about 30 minutes. They are believed to have touched on promoting trade as well as uniting Muslim countries.

Malaysia, a strong critic of the US-led invasion of Iraq, has expressed deep concern over the US intention of invading Syria after accusing it of having weapons of mass destruction, harbouring senior Iraqi officials and aiding terror groups fighting Israel in Lebanon.

Details of the talks have yet to be known but Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar has said that international issues like the situation in Iraq and the US-engineered road map would be among the main topics.

Prior to his two-day visit here, Dr Mahathir was in Algiers for an official visit and later Swaziland to attend the South African International Dialogue (SAID).

President Assad is scheduled to host a state dinner in honour of the Prime Minister at the People's Palace tonight. He assumed presidency in July 2000, taking over from his father, Hafez, regarded as one of the most skilful Arab leaders of his generation.

Syria, with a population of 17 million, gained independence from the French in 1946 but lost the Golan Heights to Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israel War.

Recent reports said that Syria is expected to ask Malaysia to exert its influence as chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) to support its motion to the United Nations for a declaration that West Asia is free from weapons of mass destruction.

Dr Mahathir is leading a 70-member delegation comprising Cabinet Ministers, Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers as well as leaders of at least 22 companies.

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