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Mahathir-Lebanon

PM'S VISIT CAPS MALAYSIA'S AID PROGRAMME FOR LEBANON

By: Azman Ujang

BEIRUT, Jan 20 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's programme to help the reconstruction of Lebanon got underway in earnest today with the arrival of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to this strategic West Asian nation whose economy was shattered by 15 years of civil war that ended in 1990.

The two-day visit is a follow-up to Kuala Lumpur's recent announcement of a RM1.145 billion loan to Lebanon to rebuild its economy and the priority Dr Mahathir attaches to the programme is reflected in political and corporate big-wigs accompanying him.

Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, who in a previous interview admits to having "great respect and admiration" for Dr Mahathir, was on hand to greet Dr Mahathir and his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, when the special Royal Malaysian Air Force Global Express jet landed at the Beirut International Airport at 12.30pm (6.30pm Malaysian time).

The arrival ceremony was telecast live over Lebanese television.

Dr Mahathir flew to Paris in November last year to attend a special conference on Lebanon's reconstruction hosted by the French government where he announced the financial package which made Malaysia the third largest contributor among a growing list of countries that pledged aid to the country.

The biggest loan pledge came from Saudi Arabia with US\$700 million (RM2.66 billion) and France with US\$500 million (RM1.9 billion).

Apart from Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, senior ministers like Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik (Transport), Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu (Works) and Datuk Amar Leo Moggie (Energy, Communications and Multimedia) are here along with top corporate leaders like Petronas president and chief executive Tan Sri Hassan Marican, Usaha Tegas Group of Companies chairman Ananda Krishnan and RHB group chairman Tan Sri Rashid Hussain.

The others included businessman Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Al Bukhary, Telekom Malaysia chief executive Datuk Dr Khir Abdul Rahman, Bank Negara Governor Tan Sri Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz and Finance Ministry Secretary-General Tan Sri Samsuddin Hitam.

Members of the Malaysian delegation and their Lebanese counterparts would meet here over the next two days on plans to disburse the loan.

During the November Paris conference, Syed Hamid said that Malaysia was expected to contribute its expertise in information technology (IT) and tourism to Lebanon's reconstruction programme.

Lebanon, once a thriving financial and business centre dubbed Paris of West Asia, has received a huge boost from the international community with lending nations writing off some US\$31 billion (RM118 billion) of its international debts.

Dr Mahathir said at the Paris conference that the new loans offered by the countries would help Lebanon, with a population of three million, ease further its debt burden.

"We know they are good paymasters. They never defaulted," he said then.

Soon after arrival, Dr Mahathir and Hariri met over lunch at the Koraytem Palace where the Malaysian leader is staying.

This was followed by a four-eye meeting at Hariri's office between the two leaders before members of their delegations went into discussions on details of the programme.

Later, they were due to appear at a joint news conference to be held well past midnight Malaysian time.

Hariri has visited Malaysia a number of times, both private and official, with the last one being last year.

Dr Mahathir's first day programme ended with a dinner with Lebanese President Emile Lahoud at the "Baabda" Presidential Palace.

At the dinner President Lahoud conferred the National Order of The Sedar (Grand Cordon) Award on Dr Mahathir.

The Lebanese Prime Minister personally drove Dr Mahathir and his wife to the palace for the dinner.

-- BERNAMA

AU AHH RM JK