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Mahathir-Timor

MALAYSIA PUTS TIES WITH TIMOR LESTE ON STRONGER FOOTING

By: Ahmad Zukiman Zain

DILI, Oct 23 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad laid the foundation stone for the new Malaysian Embassy complex here, putting the country's ties with Timor Leste on stronger ground.

The Prime Minister also planted a sandalwood tree at the strategic, sea-front site at Praia dos Conqueiros, symbolising Malaysia's commitment to working with Timor Leste in its reconstruction process.

In a speech to commemorate the event, Timor Leste's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Dr Jose Ramos Horta, acknowledged the importance of bilateral ties between the two countries and commended Dr Mahathir for being the first head of Government to visit this country since its independence in May 2002.

Also present were Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik.

The historic ceremony was part of a tight schedule for Dr Mahathir who was on the second day of his three-day visit which started with the official welcoming ceremony at the Government Palace this morning.

He was received by his Timor Leste counterpart, Mari Alkatiri, who later accompanied him on the inspection of a guard-of-honour.

After the ceremony, Dr Mahathir proceeded to the Parliament Building, a short distance away, to address a gathering of Parliamentarians and Council of Ministers of Timor Leste.

The Prime Minister spoke about the many forms of governments, including the democratic Parliamentary system in particular, since it is practised by both countries.

Saying democracy was the best system yet devised by man to govern human society, he reiterated that it could be made to work only if the people learned to understand the limits and the weaknesses of democracy and to accept them.

While most multi-racial countries were faced with continuous racial conflicts, he said, Malaysia was peaceful.

"An authoritarian country can easily ensure peace but a democratic country finds it very difficult.

"Yet Malaysia has managed its racial problems well. This is because Malaysians understand the weaknesses and limits of democracy and we do not exceed these limits," he said.

He noted that some quarters had said that Malaysia was not democratic. "Yet they don't criticise countries which are friendly to them even though these countries have undemocratic authoritarian Governments," he said.

Dr Mahathir said it was clear that their criticisms of Malaysia were motivated by political considerations. "Malaysia is not worried. We are democratic," he said.

"How else can you explain the large number of opposition members being elected to the Federal and State legislatures, so much so that presently two States are ruled by parties opposed to the Federal Government," said Dr Mahathir, who received a standing ovation after the speech.

The Prime Minister also paid a courtesy call on Timor Leste President Xanana Gusmao and addressed a business dialogue after lunch.

"Malaysia is a firm believer in the ability of countries to be

self-reliant, but we also understand that the process can be facilitated with continued support and encouragement from nations with similar experience that have the desire to do so.

"In this regard, Malaysia is committed to working with Timor Leste in its process of reconstruction.

"We were here when you were in the process of establishing your country and we will continue to cooperate and collaborate in your economic development endeavours," he said at the dialogue.

He later met Alkatiri for talks at the Government Palace. Both Prime Ministers later led their respective sides for a delegation meeting which was expected to explore opportunities for enhancing bilateral ties.

A signing ceremony on the economic, technical, scientific and cultural agreement was expected to be inked following the talks. This would be followed by the handing over of military trucks and equipment from Malaysia for the Timor Leste defence forces.

Dr Mahathir will attend an official dinner hosted by Alkatiri tonight. He will leave for Papua New Guinea for a two-day visit tomorrow morning.

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