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Mahathir-Hariri

MALAYSIA ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST SOPHISTICATED ECONOMIES, SAYS LEBANESE PM

By: Azman Ujang

BEIRUT, Jan 21 (Bernama) -- Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has turned his country into one of the world's most sophisticated economies, Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri said Monday.

Describing Dr Mahathir as a big leader of the moderate Muslim world, he said that Malaysia and Dr Mahathir "present the real Islam".

Speaking at a joint news conference with Dr Mahathir at the end of their bilateral talks on the first day of the prime minister's visit here, he said:

"You know how much Muslims these days are under attack and we are very proud to have a leader like Dr Mahathir, who is very well-known in the world".

"He is a leader with a vision, moderate, strong and has led his country to the best and this shows an example to moderate Muslims of what they can achieve in leading their countries and Malaysia is one of the leading countries in the Muslim world," he said.

Asked if he would miss Dr Mahathir, who is due to step down in October this year after 22 years as prime minister, he replied:

"Should be. We have talked about this, you know this is up to the Malaysian people and to the prime minister to decide, but if we had a word, I would ask him to stay.

Hariri said he told Dr Mahathir during their meeting that he would always be welcome to Lebanon as a great friend and as a leader of the moderate Muslim world.

He said Dr Mahathir was not only the leader of Malaysia but also one of the few leaders of the world who took his country from where it was 22 years ago and to what it is now.

"So we welcome you here. We feel proud that you are among us, your people and yourself are always welcome to Lebanon anytime," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he was amazed at the reconstruction of Lebanon, a country ravaged by 15 years of civil war that ended in 1990.

"I was very keen to come to see for myself the changes that have taken place since my last visit five years ago. I'm quite amazed. Flying in just now I could see tremendous construction that has been completed with high-rise buildings all over the city.

"I think this is a great job that has been done by the leadership in Lebanon, especially Prime Minister Hariri.

Dr Mahathir said he was very glad that he had made this visit which enabled him to renew the friendship and cooperation between the two countries.

The prime minister, who is accompanied by several top businessmen, expressed confidence that the businessmen from Malaysia would help to build greater economic interaction with Lebanon to the mutual benefit of both countries.

Malaysia has pledged RM1.4 billion loan for the reconstruction at the Paris conference on Lebanon which he attended last November.

Asked about the Paris conference, Dr Mahathir said it was a very good meeting and the countries that participated were very generous in helping Lebanon rebuild its economy while participation at the conference was at a high level.

The conference was hosted by French President Jacques Chirac.

"I'm very sure that this will be very helpful to Lebanon because it

will help to reduce the cost of money which Lebanon needs in order to reconstruct from now on. I should imagine that it will be able to reduce your debts and will create prosperity for Lebanon to enable you to grow much faster.

The Paris conference raised more than US5 billion (RM19 billion). Saudi Arabia offered the largest contribution of US700 million (RM2.6 billion), France US500 million (RM1.9 billion) and Malaysia and other Gulf states put up a total US4 billion (RM15.2 billion). The remaining US1 billion (RM3.8 billion) was pledged by the countries in technical aid.

Hariri said that in his talks with Mahathir he encouraged Malaysia to participate in gas exploration in Lebanon as well as in the privatisation of electricity and water supply.

He said he would also like Malaysian businessmen to invest in the cellular phone and telecommunications industry in the country.

Asked if Malaysian companies would be given special concession when investing in the country, Hariri said Lebanon's system was based on open tender and open system but he was sure that Malaysian companies would be treated "as friends".

"Malaysian companies, I'm sure, offer competitive prices. The cost of construction in Malaysia, to the best of my knowledge, is competitive to most of the world, so we encourage Malaysian companies to come and participate in the development of Lebanon," he said.

To this, Dr Mahathir said he felt Lebanon had become a very stable country.

"Of course, when the war was being fought here, we never thought that it would ever recover but when I came here five years ago, you were already beginning to rebuild Lebanon and it has been very stable ever since.

"Now that I'm here again, I feel that you are able to maintain that stability and therefore you would be very attractive for foreign investment and foreign participation in your economic development."

He said there had always been very good understanding between them and he considered Hariri as a very good friend apart from being the leader of Lebanon.

"We have always got on very well together, we talked about friendship and about how we could improve relations between our two countries, especially in the trade and economic fields," he said.

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