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OIC-Wrap-up

MUSLIM LEADERS CALL FOR ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

By: Shakir Husain

PUTRAJAYA, Oct 15 (Bernama) -- Muslim leaders today called for closer economic links among the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) states, urging the private sector to play a greater role in fostering intra-Islamic trade and investment.

The OIC countries must learn more about each other and facilitate business-friendly climate to achieve higher levels of economic development, the leaders told a business forum on the eve of the 10th OIC Summit here.

Speakers at the forum, held in conjunction with the summit, took turns to drive home the message that Muslims must develop economically if they were to achieve a modicum of progress.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad suggested that Muslims set up business schools where the best Islamic economic practices could be developed, nurtured and then globally promoted to "give stature and success" to Muslim businesses.

"There is a need for Muslim business schools where the Muslim business ethics are developed, expanded and taught systematically. We need to know the rights and wrongs of doing business as Muslims.

"We need to establish certain standards," Dr Mahathir told the OIC Business Forum organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (Asli).

The prime minister said the Islamic business practices could be propagated globally later.

"Just as today, we go to the great business schools of the West, there may come a day when Muslim business schools would attract students of business from all over the world," Dr Mahathir said in his keynote address.

Responding to a question after the speech, the prime minister said the idea of using the gold dinar in international trade could be put into practice even if just two countries accepted it.

The agreement of the entire 57-member OIC was not needed to adopt the plan, Dr Mahathir said: "We cannot wait. Even if there are two of us, we can already work. If we get 10, it is already a big number."

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf urged the OIC countries to adopt pro-market policies to promote intra-Islamic trade and investment.

"If we want to attract OIC investors, the best way to do that is to be attractive to all investors," he said.

He said some OIC countries such as Malaysia "have shown visible gains" by pursuing business-friendly policies.

Musharraf said that with one-fifth of the world's land mass possessing 70 per cent of the global energy resources and accounting for 40 per cent of the world's total raw material exports, the OIC as a group had failed to convert its human and physical resources into economic achievement.

"The GDP (gross domestic product) of the entire ummah is roughly US\$1,400 billion while that of Japan alone is US\$4,500 billion. The highest GDP of a Muslim country is US\$185 billion while that of tiny European countries with no natural resources is above US\$200 billion. This disparity is because of the technological and human resource edge they enjoy," Musharraf said.

He said incomes within the OIC were also skewed as only six countries accounted for half of the OIC income, while the remaining 51 generated "a meagre income of barely \$600 billion".

Bosnian President Sulejman Tihic appealed for OIC investment to help

his country's economy.

He said Bosnia was especially keen on Malaysian investment on building highways and road networks.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, OIC Secretary-General Dr Abdelouahed Belkeziz, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Sudanese President Omar Hassan Al Bashir also addressed the gathering.

Citing Malaysian petroleum company Petronas' investment in the oil and gas sector, Bashir said the business climate in Sudan was conducive for foreign investment.

The deputy prime minister urged private companies in the OIC countries to forge close relations.

The two-day forum also heard calls for making such business forum a permanent feature at OIC summits.

While the spotlight remained on business, political issues continued to draw the attention of the leaders.

The United States-controlled Iraqi Governing Council said peacekeepers from Muslim countries were not welcome in Iraq.

"We are capable of maintaining peace and security in our own country," council leader Ayad Allawi told reporters here.

Iraq will be among major issues to be discussed at the leaders' summit beginning tomorrow.

The OIC is expected to strongly condemn Israeli violence in Palestine and threats against Syria.

Saudi Arabia today became the latest country to publicly support of restructuring the Jeddah-based OIC, which has been criticised for inaction on problems faced by Muslims.

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