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Syria-Mahathir

SYRIA TO DISCUSS MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT WITH DR M

By: Ahmad Zaini Kamaruzzaman

DAMASCUS, May 1 -- Malaysia and Syria will discuss the Middle East crisis and ways to improve bilateral ties between Kuala Lumpur and Damascus when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad makes an official visit to the country in August.

Discussions between Dr Mahathir and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad are expected to focus on efforts to promote closer ties for mutual benefit.

Syria is expected to seek Malaysia's assistance in economic, science and technology and tourism sectors.

Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Walid Mualim said his country was impressed and marvelled at the leadership of Dr Mahathir who not only succeeded in developing Malaysia, but also showed serious concern to the settlement of the Middle East conflict through the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

"Syria holds Malaysia in high esteem, particularly Dr Mahathir's leadership, and hope the two countries, as members of the OIC and NAM, can forge stronger bilateral ties.

"Syria wants to tap the benefits from Malaysia's success in the economic, technology and tourism sectors.

"The economic agenda is very important to promote exchange of visits by businessmen from the two countries. The visits will mark the beginning of closer bilateral ties between Kuala Lumpur and Damascus.

"Syria and its people are waiting for Dr Mahathir's arrival," he told the Joint Media Team Malaysia (JMTM) at his office yesterday.

Malaysian Ambassador to Syria Datuk Abdullah Sani Omar was also present.

Mualim said that since Dr Mahathir was the Chairman of NAM and the incoming Chairman of the OIC, he and al-Assad are expected to engage in serious talks on the occupation of Iraq by the US and its allies, the post-war situation in Iraq, Arab-Israeli issues and the Palestine conflict.

On the support of Islamic and Arabic countries to Syria's proposal to the United Nations to ban weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, he said as a member of the Security Council, Syria mooted the idea on behalf of the Arab countries.

Apart from the Arab League and NAM, Malaysia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations also supported Syria's suggestion aimed at avoiding tension in the Middle East following Israel's refusal to withdraw from the occupied territories in Palestine and Syria.

As to the US' view, which agreed to the proposal, but said the time was not right until a comprehensive settlement was reached on the Arab-Israeli conflict, Mualim said it should be the beginning to the settlement of the conflict and to provide confidence and stability in the Middle East.

Asked whether the US was honest with its support, he said: "It's a difficult question to answer, but whether the US has good intentions or bad, we've not seen its sincerity towards the problems in the Arab world in the past decades.

"What we see is that the US is more inclined to Israel.

"Nevertheless, we hope the US will look at the problems in this region objectively," he said.

Mualim was also asked on the possibility of the US imposing trade sanctions on Syria following accusations that Damascus had chemical weapons and harboured Iraqi leaders loyal to deposed President Saddam Hussein.

He said the sanctions, if imposed, would not have a serious impact on Syria's economy as it did not receive any aid from the US and American companies also do not have any business interests in Syria, including in the petroleum sector.

On Israel's occupation of Syria's Golan Heights, Mualim said it would not be a problem to Syria if the Jewish regime complied to the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council.

He said negotiations for a peaceful settlement had been going on since the occupation in 1967.

"We want the peace initiatives to be respected as they will lead to the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

"It's not up to us, it depends on whether Israel wants to abide by the UN's decision," he added.

-- JMTM