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Syria

SYRIA CAN SEEK M'SIA'S HELP TO DEVELOP ECONOMY - DR SALAAH

By: Ahmad Zaini Kamaruzzaman

DAMASCUS, April 29: Syria, under pressure from the United States for allegedly having nuclear weapons, can seek Malaysia's assistance to help develop its economy if trade sanctions are imposed on the country, a top official of the country's chamber of commerce and industry said.

Dr Rateb Salaah, President of the Syrian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said Syria, which holds Malaysia and its leadership in high esteem, believed Malaysia was well-positioned to help out based on the close ties between Kuala Lumpur and Damascus.

"Syria believes Malaysia has the capacity and skills that will be of benefit to the country," he told Joint Media Team Malaysia (JMTM) journalists here yesterday.

He said if the US slammed trade sanctions, Syria could rely on other countries, especially Malaysia, to develop various sectors, particularly the country's economy.

Syria could learn Malaysia's expertise in diverse fields to generate economic and trade activities, especially in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

"Bilateral ties between Malaysia and Syria became closer since Kuala Lumpur opened its embassy here in February last year, followed by visits by several ministers to hold negotiations in various fields, including trade, ICT and tourism," he said

Dr Salaah said ties between the two countries are expected to scale greater heights with the impending visit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Syria.

He admitted that the Iraq issue was an obstacle to the Syria-US ties, but if trade sanctions were to be imposed, would not affect the country because of the small trade volume between the two countries.

"The trade volume is only US\$60 million (RM228 million). The sanctions will have no meaning. Furthermore, goods from the US, like the hi-tech ones, can be obtained anywhere, including in Malaysia," he said.

He said trade links with Malaysia had existed all this while, but they could be enhanced further as Malaysia was a major manufacturer of industrial and electronic products.

He said Syria, which was restructuring its economy, needed assistance from countries like Malaysia which was prepared to offer training in vocational, human resource and IT sectors.

"However, this does not mean we do not want to cooperate with the US. There are a lot of avenues for us to cooperate with the US, but the Iraq issue has been a stumbling block.

"However, if at all sanctions are imposed, it will only be a temporary move. Every problem will be taken to the negotiation table," he said.

On the visit by the US Secretary of State Colin Powell to Syria early next month, Dr Salaah said his country did not have good relations with Iraq since 1980 and protests to the country's occupation by the US did not mean Syria supported deposed president Saddam Hussein's regime.

"It's because we felt that war will cause more sufferings to the people who are already facing hardship," he added.

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