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Dr Mahathir and wife arrive in Lebanon for two-day official visit

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrived here yesterday for a two-day visit to take a closer look at the on-going reconstruction of the Lebanese economy from the viewpoint of Malaysian private sector participation.

Accompanied by Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and several Ministers, Dr Mahathir touched down at Air Force Base, Beirut International Airport, just before noon.

After the official red carpet welcome, Dr Mahathir was whisked to the guest house within Koraytem Palace, the official residence of his counterpart, Rafic Hariri.

Dr Mahathir's visit is a follow-through exercise after his offer in November last year of a US\$300 million (RM1.14 billion) concessionary loan to rebuild Lebanon, a nation that had suffered a civil war for almost two decades until 1992.

The offer was made when Dr Mahathir attended in Paris the Conference and Support for the Programme for Economic Reforms in Lebanon, which was held on the initiative of France and attended by 18 countries.

Also in the Prime Minister's delegation were Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, Energy, Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Amar Leo Moggie, Finance Ministry secretary-general Tan Sri Samsudin Hitam and Bank Negara Governor Tan Sri Zeti Akhtar Aziz.

Several businessmen, led by Petronas president and chief executive Tan Sri Hassan Marican, arrived a day earlier to explore business opportunities in Lebanon. Others were RHB chairman Tan Sri Abdul Rashid Hussain, Al Bukhary Foundation executive chairman Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Al Bukhary and Telekom chief executive officer Datuk Dr Khir Abdul Rahman.

Representatives of leading engineering and construction companies were also in the entourage.

With the Prime Minister paving the way via a Government-to-Government push, the Malaysian private sector is expected to link up with local companies and play an active, profitable part in the reconstruction effort.

After a private lunch between Dr Mahathir and Hariri where they were joined by their spouses, the two leaders had a private meeting to discuss bilateral issues with emphasis on joint collaboration in the Lebanon economy. This was followed by a delegation meeting when Ministers and senior officials joined in the deliberations.

Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah later paid a courtesy call on President Emile Lahoud at the Presidential Palace where Dr Mahathir was conferred the National Order of the Cedar (Grand Cordon), one of the highest awards given by Lebanon to a foreign dignitary.