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Dr M impressed with rapid pace of Lebanon's reconstruction

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he was amazed at the rapid pace of Lebanon's reconstruction since the country's civil war in the 1980s. "It's amazing and I'm very impressed."

The Prime Minister said this at a joint Press conference after his meeting with Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. The two leaders had a private meeting on Monday and were later joined by Ministers to further explore joint development efforts.

Dr Mahathir said: "There's tremendous construction going on. Prime Minister Hariri has done a great job and I can see high-rise buildings across many parts of the city. I hope the political stability which Lebanon has enjoyed in recent years will continue as this is a crucial element if you want to see more progress and development.

"I'm very happy to renew my friendship with Prime Minister Hariri and work with him and his Government on matters of co-operation that are mutually beneficial. We get on well together and we hope to improve relations further."

Dr Mahathir and Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali arrived here on Monday for an overnight stay en route to Cairo before attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Several Ministers and senior officials are in the entourage, backed by a group of businessmen who are looking for opportunities here.

At the Paris 2 conference in November, Malaysia pledged a soft loan of US\$300 million (RM1.14 billion) to Lebanon. The French-initiated conference was held to help find ways to redevelop and reconstruct Lebanon following its civil war, which ended in 1992.

Dr Mahathir said: "When Mr Hariri told me of the progress that had taken place after the initial reconstruction work, I just had to see the latest. I was here in 1997 and saw part of the destruction and the then on-going repair work."

When asked whether the Paris 2 conference had achieved results, the Prime Minister said it was very helpful and a lot of progress had been made since. Executives of Malaysian companies accompanying him on the trip are ready to work with locals to help speed up reconstruction.

The Lebanese Prime Minister was also asked whether there were specific industries in which Malaysian companies should participate, and whether they would be given any special incentives.

Hariri pointed out that they might want to consider involvement in road-building and power-generation ventures, especially now that Lebanon had the kind of stability investors want.

"We've maintained that stability, and proven that multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Lebanese can work side by side to bring more development. We believe in the open tender system, which means that we will be looking for competitive bidders.

"Malaysian companies will be treated as friends, of course, but we are looking for competitive operators," Hariri said.

Yesterday morning, Dr Mahathir and his entourage were taken on a tour of some of the rebuilt areas of the city. From a city torn by bloody civil war, Beirut has stirred back to life with a busy retail business and an energetic and friendly night scene.

His tour took him to the city centre and the picturesque marina.

Dr Mahathir then had a meeting with the president of Lebanon's national

assembly, Nabih Berry, before addressing parliamentarians and businessmen over lunch.

He then met a group of businessmen in the Islamic Business Council before leaving for Cairo in the evening.

In his speech, the Prime Minister spoke at length on the Malaysian experience in overcoming the financial crisis that hit several countries in 1997. Noting that Malaysia and Lebanon had several things in common - their multi-ethnicity being the most prominent - Dr Mahathir said he hoped to share common approaches in the development of their countries.

Outlining what many Malaysians have come to know in great detail, that is, the country's unique method of dealing with the financial crisis, the Prime Minister said:

"We believe that exchanges of information are important. We think we can learn from others and we are quite open to giving information to anyone who may think there is something to learn from us," he said, as he gave a detailed account of the country's policies.