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Syria to discuss ways to improve bilateral ties

DAMASCUS, Thurs. - 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 the 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 has not only succeeded in developing Malaysia, but also showed serious concern on 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 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," he told the Joint Media Team Malaysia at his office yesterday.

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

Walid said Dr Mahathir and Bashar are expected to engage in talks on the occupation and post-war situation in Iraq, Arab-Israeli issues and the Palestine conflict.

On the support of Islamic and Arabic countries for Syria's proposal to the UN to ban weapons of mass destruction in the Middle-East, he said Syria mooted the idea on behalf of the Arab countries.

Apart from the Arab League and NAM, Malaysia's Permanent Representative to the UN also supported Syria's proposal.

The US, which agreed with the proposal, however, said the time was not right until a comprehensive settlement was reached on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Walid said the proposal would ensure the beginning to the settlement of the conflict and provide confidence and stability in the Middle-East.

Asked whether the US was honest in 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."

Walid 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. - JMTM