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PM's pledge to share with Syria

Carolyn Hong

MALAYSIA is willing to "open its books" to enable Syria to learn from its experiences in developing its economy and society, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

He said where Malaysia's strategies fit Syria, it was welcome to them.

Speaking at a Press conference on Sunday, he said Malaysia, too, at one time did not have any technological know-how but gained it by opening its doors to foreign investors.

To a question on globalisation, he said he was a believer in globalisation but not in the self-serving interpretation by rich and powerful countries.

"(Thus), when we meet in the World Trade Organisation meetings, we want to work with other developing countries to reinterpret globalisation to benefit us," he said.

Asked about the 12 memoranda of understanding signed between Malaysia and Syria, Dr Mahathir said as a follow-up, the relevant ministries would have designated officers to act as focal points.

Dr Mahathir also described his meeting with Syrian President Dr Bashar Al-Assad and Prime Minister Mustapha Mero as "very good", and noted that their stand on international matters were similar.

Yesterday, Dr Mahathir highlighted Malaysia's success to leading members of the Syrian community in two sessions - a business dialogue and a dialogue with ministers, MPs and scholars.

At the business dialogue chaired by Economy and Foreign Trade Minister Dr Ghassan Rifai, Dr Mahathir said the shared religious beliefs of Malaysians and Syrians can help them understand each other better.

"However, we cannot just depend on our common beliefs to survive in the international business environment that is becoming more and more competitive. There is a need for good business relations founded on strong business fundamentals which need to be constantly reviewed and improved," he said.

Dr Mahathir also urged the business community of both countries to go beyond indulging in exchanges of views and experiences, and instead aim for substantive results and actual business transactions.

He said not enough had been done to pursue business linkages as evident from the low level of bilateral trade.

Among the new areas of investment, he said, were the rapidly-expanding construction sector in Syria, education and Islamic banking.

In response to a question, he said the lack of Malaysian investment in Syria was due to a lack of information on Syria's policies.

He said, several Malaysian companies had been "burnt" in certain African countries in which they had large investments.

"When the governments of these countries change, they often refuse to recognise agreements signed by their predecessors.

"I am sure it doesn't happen in Syria but we need to know more."

To another question, he said it was important for Syria to expedite its accession to the World Trade Organisation as it would give it a voice when new trading rules were discussed.

"The way it is going, unless we put a stop to it, we (developing countries) will lose out," he said adding that the powerful nations looked only after their own interest.

Speaking later, he said Malaysia had previously not focused on Syria as

an investment destination, but would now be serious about it.