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PM: Syria, Lebanon should take part in Mid-East peace talks

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who began a two-day official visit here yesterday, has called for the participation of Syria and Lebanon in the Middle East peace process.

Saying that this was necessary for permanent peace in the region, he expressed Malaysia's hope to see the inclusion of the Golan Heights and Sheba Farm in the US-brokered road map for Middle East peace.

Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and has held occasional peace talks with Israel for its return.

However, Dr Mahathir said the road map could have had a better chance of success if Iraq had not been invaded.

He was speaking at a state dinner hosted in his honour by Syrian President Dr Bashar Al-Assad.

Dr Mahathir landed early in the morning at the Damascus International Airport to an official welcoming ceremony. He was accompanied by his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

Dr Mahathir said with the United States invasion of Iraq, there was now the Iraqi insurgency to deal with in addition to the Palestinian problem. "And terrorism still threatens the world," he said.

He said the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was the root of the Middle East problem, and "venting our anger by simply killing people as is done by both sides will solve nothing".

He added that a loud wake-up call has been sounded for the Muslims following the Sept 11 attack that triggered the war on terrorism and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

"We can no longer stay disunited if we do not want to fall one by one. Muslims must acquire information, knowledge and technology and keep abreast with the developments in the Muslim world.

"Malaysia believes that with financial wealth and natural resources at our disposal, Muslim countries can become strong if we manage our internal affairs well," he said.

Dr Mahathir said far from the glorious Islamic past, Islam today was perceived as a religion that promoted acts of terror. The Muslims are weak and divided, and discriminated against in the West.

Muslim countries are invaded on the pretext of harbouring terrorists or on mere suspicion of possessing weapons of mass destruction.

"Several more Islamic countries are now being threatened or targeted for a regime change," he said.

Syria itself was a target of US threats in May when it was accused of harbouring Iraqi terrorists. He added that the weak and least developed nations, many of them Islamic nations, were vulnerable and easy prey for a "regime change".

On bilateral relations, Dr Mahathir said mutual efforts were being undertaken to enhance ties beyond trade to information and communications technology, culture, education, tourism, human resource development, youth, sports, oil and gas.

There are 158 Malaysian students pursuing tertiary religious studies in Syria while 27 Syrian students are studying medicine, science and technology, and Islamic studies in Malaysia.

Earlier in the day, Dr Mahathir had a meeting with Bashar at Qasir al-Shaab (People's Palace) while Dr Siti Hasmah had a separate meeting with First Lady Asma Al-Assad.

Dr Mahathir also met Syrian Prime Minister Mustapha Mero, and later witnessed the signing of 12 memoranda of understanding on co-operation in fields like science and technology, and information technology.

A trade agreement and news exchange agreement between Bernama and Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) were also signed.