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Helping Timorese nation-building

EARLY this month, Timor Leste President Xanana Gusmao said he was looking forward to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's three-day official visit to his country because he "stands up for the Third World" and "speaks his mind on issues which others don't dare to touch on". He also sees the Malaysian model of development and natural resource management as something that his country can adopt, and hopes that Dr Mahathir's visit would pave the way for greater assistance, co-operation and investment.

One specific area of expertise that Malaysia can offer is the development of Timor Leste's vast oil and gas resources. Although Timor Leste is one of the poorest countries in the world now, with a per capita income of less than RM800 a year and is dependent on foreign assistance, things could be very different in the future if it can develop this potential. It now owns less than 20 per cent of the maritime reserves, and the long and intricate negotiations with Australia over the other 80 per cent will only begin next month. Timor Leste has still to receive royalties from its share of the "joint production area" with Australia. When Timor Leste Prime Minister Mari Amude Alkatiri visited Malaysia, Dr Mahathir expressed willingness to help plan and structure Timor Leste's own national oil company. Timor Leste will indeed benefit from Malaysia's experience in gaining control of its petroleum resources and the success story of Petronas.

Timor Leste also needs help in other areas of the economy such as agriculture and the maritime and tourism sectors, and in building its public and social infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals, and legal system. The nation-building efforts of this poor but spirited fledgling nation, which had to start virtually from scratch when it became independent in May last year, truly deserves the support of the international community. Malaysia has sent 125 police officers as part of the UN peace-keeping mission and Mara is setting up a vocational and technical training institute. Dr Mahathir said in Dili yesterday that Malaysia would help take Timor Leste into mainstream of the world economy.