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KL pledges continued support for Timor Leste

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TIMOR Leste can rely on the Malaysian Government and its private sector in ongoing efforts to develop the country so that it can participate and benefit from the mainstream of the world economy.

The offer of help was given by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who arrived on Wednesday for a three-day official visit. Dr Mahathir, accompanied by his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and several Cabinet ministers, said:

"Malaysia is committed to working with Timor Leste in its process of reconstruction. We were here when you were in the process of establishing your country and we will continue to co-operate and collaborate in your economic development endeavours.

"Our private sector has also been encouraged to invest here. As a matter of fact, in 2002, Malaysia ranked as the second largest investor in this country," Dr Mahathir said when addressing a dialogue, attended by businessmen from both countries yesterday afternoon.

Timor Leste President Xanana Gusmao and Foreign Minister Jose Ramos Horta were also present.

To date, there are more than 90 Malaysian companies investing in Timor Leste in areas such as hotels and restaurants, consultancy and accountancy services, information technology, legal aid services, transport and mechanical services, shipping and general trading activities.

Timor Leste has a population of 800,000 and gained independence from Indonesia on May 20, 2002. Its major natural resources are petroleum, natural gas, marble, timber and sandalwood.

Published unemployment rate is more than 35 per cent. It uses the US dollar as its national currency.

As the first foreign head of government to pay an official visit to the country, Dr Mahathir was given the honour of addressing the Timor Leste Parliament. In his speech, Dr Mahathir shared his views on democracy and its merit, besides giving an account of how several elements could disrupt democracy.

He said non-governmental organisations, the media, the judiciary and the administration could all play important roles in making democracy work.

"The people must accept the limitations of democracy and not expect too much from it. Prudently practised by the people and the Government, democracy can give the best form of governance.

"Democracy should be upheld and practised because it is most likely to give a country a good Government and a good life for the people.

"However, the good life of the people should not be sacrificed in order to sustain democracy," the Prime Minister said.

Dr Mahathir also refuted the belief that free trade is linked as an integral part of democracy.

"It really is not. It is only linked to democracy so as to gain legitimacy ...the idea of free trade comes from the rich and powerful countries which feel frustrated over their inability to exploit fully for themselves the potentials of the poor countries."

After addressing Parliament, Dr Mahathir laid the foundation stone of the new Malaysian embassy located along the diplomatic enclave fronting beach and the blue sea.

He also called on Gusmao at the Palace of the Ashes and had a closed-door meeting with his counterpart, Mari Alkatiri.

He also launched the Dili International Youth Forum Website and the Timor Leste K-Dot Force.

The website will provide web-based platform for information exchange before, during and after the forum to be held here from Nov 12 to 15. Fourteen Timorese ICT trainers recently underwent a two-week ICT training-of-trainers programme in Malaysia, a capacity building initiative spearheaded by Mimos.

Later, at a dinner hosted by Alkatiri, Dr Mahathir paid tribute to Timor Leste, describing it as an extraordinary and remarkable country.

"Your country has been a symbol of courage. It can stand tall and proud, as equals among nations. Malaysia is proud to have been given the privilege of welcoming Timor Leste as the newest member of the Non-Aligned Movement."

Following the signing of the economic, technical, scientific and cultural agreement with Timor Leste, Dr Mahathir proposed that Kuala Lumpur play host to the first joint commission meeting between the two countries at a later date.

At a joint Press conference with Alkatiri, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia's experience in drawing up petroleum production sharing agreements with major oil companies could be used to help Timor Leste seek a fair deal in the exploitation of its petroleum resources.

"We have vast experience in this matter. In such negotiations, one must be wary of sweet promises and they can be misleading and one-sided.

"We can provide advice ...but it is up to the Timorese Government whether to accept or not," the Prime Minister said.

Asked to comment on this, Alkatiri said his Government would evaluate all advice and input and make its own decision later.

Asked how Malaysia could help Timor Leste to face growing globalisation, Dr Mahathir said it would be best if the new independent nation were to act in collaboration with other developing countries unless it has the strength and capabilities to do so on its own.

Dr Mahathir leaves for Papua New Guinea today.