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Lebanon beckons and it's up to Malaysian businessmen

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BEIRUT, like the rest of Lebanon, is not to be visited alone. Not because it's unsafe or dangerous, but because it's too romantic a city and country to be enjoyed alone. This is a country blessed by God Almighty with a natural beauty that meets most, if not all, visitors' needs and wants.

The tour brochures and guidebooks will tell you that you can go skiing in the snowcapped mountains in the morning.

Having done that, you can change into your swimsuit and go for a swim in the Mediterranean in the evening. You must have the energy, though.

Together with several other journalists, I was in Beirut for a few days covering Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's working visit there.

It was quite obvious from the start that the people of Lebanon were friendly and helpful. They were eager to please, which made our short stay an enjoyable affair.

Several Malaysian businessmen on the trip had separate meetings to explore what's in store for them. The Government has already pledged about RM1.14 billion to the Lebanese Government as part of the plan to help in the reconstruction of the country following almost two decades of civil war.

The fighting between Christian and Muslim factions led to a period of destruction in Lebanon, with Beirut being regarded at one time as the Paris of the Middle East.

The civil war led to the exodus of thousands of Lebanese to other parts of the world to the point that there are more Lebanese outside the country than inside it.

Lebanon was under French rule in 1920. In 1926, it became a republic and gained independence in 1943. There was a lot of tension in the country which resulted in a civil war that went on for many years and ended in 1992.

The presence of a large number of Palestinians inside refugee camps in Lebanon invited Israeli harassment and offensive.

The civil war, according to documents made available by the Lebanese Government, led to damage to physical assets estimated at US\$25 billion (RM95 billion) and a quarter of the population displaced.

One in five Lebanese, comprising mainly professionals and skilled workers, left the country to eke out a living elsewhere.

But today, with French initiative under President Jacques Chirac, a conference referred to as "Paris I" and "Paris II", paved the way for the gradual reconstruction of the Lebanese economy. Having already honoured its pledge to Lebanon, Malaysia despatched its private sector to see if it can further participate in the rebuilding exercise.

This is not going to be easy, according to a young businessman I met on the trip. While Dr Mahathir's name is recognised easily and Malaysian names seen as premium investors, local businessmen have a lot of work to do if they want to succeed there.

There is a closer affinity between Lebanon and European countries and local businessmen must find ways to be in the loop.

But an editorial in the Daily Star, Beirut's major English newspaper, is eager to see a more productive link-up between businessmen of Lebanon and Malaysia.

"Local businesses must demonstrate the type of savvy Dr Mahathir has shown over the past 22 years if they are to take advantage of the

opportunities a country such as Malaysia provides. Malaysia has much more to offer Lebanon than its purchase of local Treasury bills," it said.

Malaysian businessmen need to invest time in research work before they proceed to place their investments there. A senior civil servant on the trip said opportunities were plenty, but they shouldn't expect special treatment just because the Government offered Lebanon a huge loan.

Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri himself said so when I asked him if there were going to be any special incentives for Malaysian businessmen.

"No. You will have to make a competitive bid and tender will be awarded accordingly."

Lebanon is going to be a challenge to Malaysian businessmen, especially those in the construction and engineering sectors.

Even those in the service sector, too, should look for opportunities there, particularly in the tourism industry which has vast potential.

Visiting Beirut is not cheap. The journalists on the trip stayed at a US\$150 a night hotel, while businessmen and other officials stayed at the plush Inter-Continental.

Transportation cost in the city is also expensive, but the Raouche area offers some breathtaking view.

One can sip coffee (or wine as the case may be) and enjoy a smoke in one of the many cafes on the cliff overlooking the Mediterranean.

If you're going to Beirut, MAS flies twice a week there. But make sure your cellular phone is properly connected.

Calls are expensive but text messaging services ought to keep you adequately informed. But make sure it works.

Let's see how many Malaysian businessmen keep going back to Beirut, not for the belly dancing, but for business.

The young businessman I met there insisted he'll make his way back to Beirut to deepen his knowledge about the business climate before committing his company to big capital investments there.

I wish you luck, my friend.