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Syria to turn to Malaysia if sanctions are imposed

DAMASCUS, Tues. - Syria, under pressure from the United States for allegedly harbouring top officials of the Saddam regime and storing Iraqi chemical weapons, may seek Malaysia's assistance to develop its economy if trade sanctions are imposed.

Dr Rateb Salaah, president of the Syrian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said they believed Malaysia was well positioned to help based on the close ties between Kuala Lumpur and Damascus.

"We believe Malaysia has the capacity and skills that can help Syria," he told journalists from the Joint Media Team Malaysia (JMTM) here yesterday.

He said Syria could learn from Malaysia who have the expertise in diverse fields to generate economic and trade activities, especially in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

"Bilateral ties between Malaysia and Syria became closer since Kuala Lumpur opened its embassy here in February last year.

"Several ministers has since visited Syria and held talks on trade, ICT and tourism."

Salaah said ties between the two countries are expected to be strengthened with the planned visit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He said the Iraq issue was an obstacle to Syria-US ties, but if sanctions were imposed, it would not affect the country greatly because of the small trade volume.

"The trade volume is only US\$60 million (RM228 million). Furthermore, goods from the US, like the hitech ones, can be obtained anywhere, including Malaysia.

"However, this does not mean we do not want to co-operate with the US. There are many avenues for us to co-operate with the US, but the Iraq issue has been a stumbling block.

"If sanctions are imposed, it will only be temporary. Every problem will be taken to the negotiation table."

On the visit by the US Secretary of State Colin Powell to Syria early next month, Dr Salaah said they will clarify the Syrian position.

Syria, he said, did not have good relations with Iraq since 1980 and protests over the US occupation of that country did not mean Syria supported deposed president Saddam Hussein's regime.

"We protested because we felt that war will cause more suffering to the people who were already facing hardship." - JMTM