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Opportunities going a-begging (HL)

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PETALING JAYA, Tues. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad urged the business community today to be more aggressive in pursuing trade with developing nations, particularly in Africa and West Asia, as Malaysians and the products were welcomed there.

The Prime Minister said that while those in developing nations, particularly Muslim ones, were keen to establish closer trade ties, Malaysian businessmen were not tapping the opportunities.

"I see that they (developing nations) are very interested (to pursue trade with us) but our people are not that aggressive. We don't go there or exhibit our products that could find a market there. Owing to this, they buy their products from countries such as Korea.

"For instance, Damascus is a potential market for Proton cars because they feel that our car is a better product than others in a similar category," he said.

Dr Mahathir was speaking at a Press conference at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Subang, near here.

He had just returned from a working visit to Algeria, Swaziland and Syria.

In Swaziland, he attended the Southern African International Dialogue.

The government jet carrying the Prime Minister, his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and the official delegation touched down at 2.40pm.

Ministers and senior officials were on hand to welcome the delegation members home.

Dr Mahathir said all three nations were keen to establish closer ties with Kuala Lumpur.

"They accept Malaysia as a role model and are very friendly towards us.

"Algeria and Syria in particular, would like us to establish stronger ties. They have also invited us to invest in their countries and take the opportunity of their 'open-door policy'."

Dr Mahathir said Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Syrian President Dr Bashar Al-Assad had also confirmed their participation at the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit in Putrajaya in October.

Asked if Kuala Lumpur would consider inviting government leaders outside the OIC, such as United States President George W. Bush, so that Islamic leaders could engage in dialogues, Dr Mahathir said: "No, I don't think so.

"But if anyone wants to come and if they don't violate our rules and regulations, we will welcome them."

On the probable invitation to Russian President Vladimir Putin to be an observer at the 56-nation summit, he said it was up to the OIC secretariat to decide on the list of non-OIC participants.

On the urgings of world leaders for Malaysia to play a more prominent role in uniting Muslims because it had the credibility and authority, Dr Mahathir said Kuala Lumpur would strive to do what it could.

On calls by foreign government leaders, the business community and Muslim scholars for him to continue to play important international roles after his retirement, Dr Mahathir said he would render his services if and when required, but without holding any posts.

"Some say I should not retire. Others say it is too early and there are those who think that I must contribute my services for the betterment of

Muslims.

"I will retire. And I have already stated on numerous occasions that I will continue to assist in whatever I can, even in the party (Umno), I will still assist.

"I will try my best to render my services as required."

He said everyone, particularly other Muslim nations, recognised Malaysia as a model Islamic state, which could develop itself without compromising Islamic values.

"The whole world recognises Malaysia not only as an Islamic state but also as a model Islamic state, which they would like to emulate. Not only Presidents Dr Bashar or Abdelaziz but everyone I've met, including the business community, ministers and senior government officials, endorse us as a role model." "They are keen to obtain more information on how we have managed to develop our country so that they can emulate our methods.

"It is a popular notion throughout the world that Muslim nations cannot possibly develop themselves.

"But we have proved that a Muslim nation has the ability and capability to develop itself without compromising Islam."

On domestic political developments, Dr Mahathir, who is the Barisan Nasional chairman and Umno president, said Pas' move to drop its plan to set up its concept of an Islamic state and implement hudud was a clear indication that the Opposition recognised Malaysia to be a progressive Islamic nation.

But that Pas had done so only in its Federal election manifesto showed that it was playing a double game.

"This is to cheat. It has been cheating the people of Kelantan and Terengganu by promising that it would set up an Islamic state, but at the Federal level, it says it is not pursuing the matter.

"This is actually a ploy to fish for non-Muslim votes, but I think Malaysians are not that stupid. They know what Pas is up to."