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Syria wants minimal foreign involvement in Iraq especially by US

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Syria is hoping for minimal foreign involvement, especially that of the United States, in the reconstruction of Iraq.

Its ambassador to Malaysia, Dr Kamal Sharaf said the Iraqi people were capable of rehabilitating the war-ravaged country as they had a rich intellectual and cultural heritage dating back 7,000 years.

He said no one should try to "import any form of government" into Iraq as this would be short-lived and would be ultimately rejected by the Iraqis.

Iraq was also a wealthy country with the second largest oil reserves in the world and can fund the reconstruction, provided a truly national government was established to initiate a plan to rebuild the economy.

"Foreign involvement will always look at its own interests. They go in and invest for their own benefit. This is why we hope there is no foreign involvement in the reconstruction of Iraq," Kamal said in an interview.

Pointing to the manner in which certain companies had started to negotiate contracts to rebuild the country, he said this proved the point that the issue of the day in Iraq was that of trade and not self-determination by the Iraqi people.

"Who will handle the (oil) fires in Iraq, the ports, the oil and petroleum and what are the countries that are allowed to have contracts in Iraq? The issue is one of trade and trying to have contracts here and there.

"The US said the minute they toppled Saddam, they would leave Iraq. We hope the US will leave Iraq and let the Iraqi people decide on their own government. A government that represents these people and in charge of reconstructing the country.

"This government will decide whether to ask for help from the US or any other country. The elected Iraqi Government should be responsible for taking over this job (of reconstruction)."

The reconstruction process should not be "like the sharing of a cake", he said.

Underlining the fact that Syria was not against the US or for President Saddam Hussein, he said this could be seen in its opposition to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 and the war with Iran in the 1980s.

Syrian opposition to the invasion was due to the deterioration of life in the country over the past two years due to economic sanctions, with the elderly and children suffering.

"The US must ask the questions now of why many of its embassies in the world have been attacked and how many times its flags have been burned. Only the US embassies have high walls.

"This just shows that the whole world is not happy with US policies. Being powerful does not mean you are more reasonable than other countries."

Asked to comment on US pressure on Syria to repatriate Iraqi "war criminals", he said Syria had closed its border with Iraq and was not allowing Iraqis into the country.

Kamal said the tone of US accusations against Syria had eased of late "although we have been accused of having weapons of mass destruction and harbouring terrorist groups".

Kamal said the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement should continue playing their role in resolving issues

like that in Iraq because of their social influence and political influence.

"Malaysia is now chairman of NAM. There is the personal character of (Prime Minister Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) who is very much respected on the international levels and his views appreciated.

"His stance (on Iraq and other international issues) will have great impact and importance."