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Schroeder praises Malaysia (HL)

Ashraf Abdullah; Sarban Singh

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Malaysia's success as a multi-racial country with many religions can serve as a model for other countries, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said today.

He said Malaysia's vast experience in ensuring peaceful co-existence among the various ethnic groups put it in the best position to act as a bridge between civilisations.

Schroeder said bringing civilisations closer together had become particularly important following the Sept 11 terrorist attacks on the United States for which Muslims had largely been blamed.

"It is not just because of the ethnic and religious diversity that your country is particularly important for worldwide co-operation between cultures, which I have on occasions called the fight for civilisation," he said in his lecture "Malaysia-Germany - a dialogue between civilisations" at Shangri-La Hotel organised by the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

"The early coexistence of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism in your country was met with a tolerant policy towards religions. For this reason, I think Malaysia is very well equipped to act as a bridge between civilisations."

Schroeder, who is the first German Chancellor to visit Malaysia, said Malaysia was an important partner for Germany at the regional and multilateral levels in the fight against terrorism.

He said while Germany would do all it could to fight terrorism, like the Sept 11 attacks on the US, it would also seek ways to eliminate the reasons that lead people to carry out such acts and to sympathise with the terrorists.

"Many far-sighted people have advised us to pursue an open dialogue with the Islamic world. This approach is right and proper.

"Whatever happens, we must prevent terrorism and war from giving rise to a new blanket hatred, let alone a clash of civilisations.

"No religion in the world justifies murder and wanton destruction," he said.

Schroeder said the European Union was looking for strong partners because there were many problems that could be solved through inter-regional relations.

"We would like to further develop the existing partnership between the EU and Asean. This would be most successful if Southeast Asian countries push ahead with their integration.

"Malaysia can be the engine of that integration, for your country has always assumed an active role on the world stage."

Later, responding to a question from the floor, Schroeder said he made his visit to Malaysia, the first leg of his tour of Southeast Asia, despite attempts by his wife and many others to stop him from going due to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome.

"I told them to go away because I know that I will cause some political damage if I don't come. My wife understood, and I hope the rest of them will understand."

Tomorrow, he leaves for Singapore, which has the fourth highest number of SARS cases.

Schroeder was also asked by a Bosnian student in Malaysia, Selma Kalota, whether the Group of Eight would invite Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to share his secret on how he managed to transform

Malaysia into a leader in electronic products and information technology.

Schroeder said it was up to France, the current chairman of G8, to invite Dr Mahathir.

"I am not the chairman of G8, at least not yet. But I do agree that Dr Mahathir has a wealth of experience, and if I am not mistaken, is the longest-serving head of government in Asia.

"He is very interested in new technology and is responsible for Malaysia's quantum leap to success."

Later at a dinner hosted in honour of the German Chancellor, Dr Mahathir congratulated Schroeder for his Government's "very principled stand" against the invasion of Iraq.

He said Malaysia was heartened to see that Germany, together with a few other European nations, still believed in the United Nations and international consensus. (See story this page.)

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said German companies operating in Malaysia were happy to do business here as the Government adopted an investor-friendly approach and had a pool of skilled workers.

This was conveyed to Dr Mahathir by Schroeder at a meeting after an official welcoming ceremony at Dataran Perdana in Putrajaya.

"The German companies are very happy to be here ...they say the Malaysian Government adopts a very friendly attitude towards investors," Syed Hamid said after a meeting between delegates from both countries. Both leaders also held private talks before the delegation meetings.

Syed Hamid said the meeting was both "productive and constructive" with both leaders exchanging views on several issues, including on post-war Iraq and Palestine.

He said both leaders also agreed that the Palestinian issue must be resolved for peace to prevail in the Middle East.

"They also agreed that the United Nations must have a controlling role in rebuilding post-war Iraq. They also reaffirmed their commitment to the UN and the need for multi-polar world system," he added.

The Chancellor's entourage comprises Economics and Labour Minister Wolfgang Clement and German Industry Committee for Asia-Pacific chairman Heinrich von Pierer.

Germany is Malaysia's largest trading partner in the EU.