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Strong mutually-beneficial ties critical

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in introducing Malaysia to the Algerian business community yesterday, told them that it is a partner that fully appreciates the importance of business relations.

He said Malaysia realised that its ability to face globalisation was partly to be achieved through the development of strong mutually-beneficial relations with its partners.

"Hence, our presence here," he said, referring to the large business delegation which he had brought on this official visit to Algeria.

Addressing the Malaysia-Algeria Business Dialogue at the Sheraton Club De Pins resort yesterday, he said Malaysia was keen to have a stronger presence in northern Africa.

Malaysia wanted its businessmen to tap the trade potential among South countries, which has not been explored to the fullest.

Dr Mahathir hoped the Algerian business community would also be open to new areas, and join forces with their Malaysian counterparts to explore emerging markets.

While Algeria could be a gateway to trade with the European Union and Africa, Malaysia could be a springboard to the Asean Free Trade Area, which has a combined population of half a billion and combined Gross Domestic Product of US\$750 billion (RM2.85 trillion).

Malaysia, he told them, has a good track record as a manufacturing and export base for the world.

It could also work with Algerian companies to collaborate in manufacturing for export to Europe.

He urged Algerian businessmen to participate in the business-related events in conjunction with the Islamic Summit Conference in October, including the Expo OIC from Oct 14 to 19, and OIC Business Forum from Oct 15 and 16.

"The Governments of both countries have laid down the framework for closer economic co-operation.

"Now, it is up to the private sector to actively create and capitalise on opportunities," he said.

Algeria, the second largest country in Africa after Sudan with a 32 million population, is also Malaysia's second largest trading partner in northern Africa.

However, bilateral trade at US\$126 million last year was still small.

Malaysia's major exports to Algeria are palm oil, chemical products, plywood and textile yarn, while its imports were fertilisers and electrical distributing equipment.

Dr Mahathir told the businessmen that the Malaysian Government is business-friendly as foreign direct investment remains an important strategy for its economic growth.

Its priority industries include higher-end electronic products, medical devices, engineering support industries, automotive components, biotechnology and pharmaceuticals.

To be competitive in the global economy, it has also diversified into the services sectors.

In recent years, it has successfully marketed services such as construction, healthcare, education and tourism.

Malaysian companies had undertaken construction projects in West and East Asia, Indian sub-continent and Africa.

Dr Mahathir also asked Algerian students to pursue higher education in Malaysia as at present there are only 44 of them out of a total 36,452 foreign students in Malaysia.

He later witnessed the signing of a news exchange agreement between Bernama, represented by its general manager Datuk Syed Jamil Syed Jaafar, and Algerie Presse Service, represented by director-general Nacer Mehal.

This is Bernama's ninth such agreement, the others being with Qatar, Yemen, United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Tunisia, Iran, Egypt and Turkey.

Bernama, which launched its Arabic service in October last year, sends out stories daily to them on issues of mutual interest such as the gold dinar and Islamic banking.

Earlier yesterday, Dr Mahathir also had a meeting with Algerian Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia and president of the Council of Nation, Abdelkader Bensalah.

Later, Dr Mahathir, his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and his entourage visited Bourmedes, where 1,400 people were killed and over 3,000 injured in the May 21 earthquake.

Dusty and hot, many parts of Bourmedes town, 45km from here, resembles a construction site. New housing apartments are going up, and old ones being repaired.

Some 85,000 homes and 200 schools were destroyed or damaged. The victims had to be housed in tents in 94 camps.

Soon after the earthquake hit, Malaysia donated US\$250,000 to Algeria.