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Timor Leste 'thrilled' over Dr Mahathir's impending visit

SINGAPORE, Tues. - Timor Leste President Xanana Gusmao said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would make a two-day visit to the country beginning Oct 22.

He said a high-powered delegation of entrepreneurs would accompany Dr Mahathir.

"Dr Mahathir's visit is a great honour to the people of Timor Leste. We are very excited about the visit," he told the New Straits Times in an interview arranged by the Malaysian High Commissioner here, Datuk P. Parameswaran, who was Chief of Staff of the United Nations Transitional Administration in Timor Leste (Untaet) from 2000 to 2002.

Gusmao, here on a private visit, gave a luncheon talk organised by a private company, where he was given the "Leadership with Integrity Award". Singapore's Ambassador-at-large, Prof Tommy Koh, was present.

Gusmao leaves for Kuala Lumpur tomorrow for a twoday unofficial visit.

He said Dr Mahathir's visit, although arranged about a year ago, was shelved several times.

"We are thrilled that he has kept his word to visit Timor Leste, even though we are one of the poorest countries in the world. The visit is a reflection of the Prime Minister's stature as a statesman," he added.

Gusmao said he was a great admirer of Dr Mahathir. "He stands up for the Third World. He speaks his mind on issues which others don't dare to touch on. His fighting spirit and courage is worthy of admiration. This is one reason why we are looking forward to his visit," he said.

Gusmao said Malaysia was a "close friend" of Timor Leste, which broke away from Indonesian rule in August 1999 and became independent on May 20 last year.

He said of all the countries in Asia, Timor Leste found the "Malaysian model" of national development and natural resource management most suitable for adaptation.

He hoped Dr Mahathir's visit would open new avenues for greater assistance, co-operation and investments by Malaysian industrialists in the poverty-stricken country.

Timor Leste is also seeking Malaysia's support for it to be included in the Asean Regional Forum and as an observer in Asean.

Timor Leste Prime Minister Dr Mari Alkatiri led a 27-member delegation on a working visit to Malaysia last month.