

360 soldiers for Lebanon

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Malaysian team gets UN nod to join peacekeeping force

NEW YORK: Malaysia will soon deploy 360 soldiers as part of a peacekeeping force in Lebanon, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

He said UN secretary-general Kofi Annan had told him on Tuesday that Malaysia's request to deploy its peacekeepers had been granted.

"We had originally offered to send about 1,000 soldiers. I have been told that they will inform us if there is a need to increase the force," Abdullah, who had earlier met Annan, told Malaysian reporters on Tuesday.

The peacekeepers will be deployed to southern Lebanon under a UN-brokered ceasefire that ended the war between Israel and the Hezbollah.

Abdullah, who also met with leaders of non-governmental organisations here, said they had exchanged views on issues that had divided Muslims and Christians, and between the West and the Islamic world.

"I had the chance to explain to them the Malaysian experience in preventing conflicts between people of different faiths or ethnic groups," he said, citing the Sedition Act which disallowed inflammatory speeches and Malaysia's ruling coalition which was based on power-sharing.

Furthermore, he had told them Malaysians from all walks of life mingle with one another on occasions such as open houses during festivals.

"They felt Malaysia had been truly successful in this respect," he said.

On his meeting with the Asean-US Business Council, Abdullah said he had briefed them on the 9th Malaysia Plan and the Industrial Master Plan (2006-2020).

Abdullah, here for the 61st UN general assembly, said George W. Bush's address on Tuesday to the assembly had reflected the US president's usual stand on the Middle East.

"It's a reflection of his views and how he wants the issues to be resolved."

In **Kuala Lumpur**, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said the core of the peacekeeping force would be from the army, with some personnel from the air force and navy.

"In terms of leadership, we will be sending a colonel to head the team, and the majority will be from the 4th Mechanised Brigade based in Kuantan," he said.

Najib said the Defence Ministry was ready to send more personnel if given the approval.