

The Official Dinner Hosted By His Excellency Dr Bashar Hafeez Al Assad President Of The Syrian Arab Republic

Syrian Arab Republic, 17 August 2003

Thank you, Mr. President, for your warm words of welcome. I am truly delighted to be here in this great city of Damascus. I must confess that the beauty of Damascus, a city with a rich cultural and historical past, overwhelms me. On behalf of my wife and members of my delegation, I would like to convey our sincere appreciation and gratitude to you, your Government and the people of Syria for the very warm welcome and generous hospitality accorded to us.

2. I must also confess that I have always been fascinated by the history of your great nation. Often referred to, as the Cradle of Civilisation and the Gateway to History, Syria is not an alien country to Malaysians. For the Muslims, the history of Syria is written into our text books as we studied about the history of Islam and its great civilisation during the time of the Prophet (pbuh), his Sahabah like Sayyidina Abu Bakar, Omar, Othman and Ali as well as many other great Muslim leaders and warriors including Khalid ibn Walid, Nur al Deen and Salahuddin Al Ayubbi who struggled to spread the message of Islam or defended the religion against the Crusaders.

3. One of the defining moments in Syria's history had been the reign of the Umayyads 661 - 750 AD, during which period the Islamic empire and civilisation extended from the south of France and Andalusia in Spain to the Indus valley in India in the south, and to the west of China in the east. Some of the most notable practices adopted during the rule of the Umayyads were tolerance towards other faiths and the support and encouragement given to education and the sciences. Damascus had then transformed into a prominent centre for learning, famous the world over and home to many scholars and thinkers like Ibn Katheer and Imam Al Nawawi.

4. Such was the glory enjoyed by the Muslims in the historical past. Unfortunately the same cannot be said of the Muslims of today. In the wake of September 11 attacks on the US, Islam is perceived as a religion that promotes acts of terror. The Muslims are weak and divided and are being discriminated against in the West. Islamic countries were invaded on the pretext of either harbouring terrorists or on mere suspicion of possessing weapons of mass destruction. Several more Islamic countries are now being threatened or targeted for "regime change".

5. It is unfortunate that in the unipolar world that we live in today, there exists a trend for the law of the jungle,

where might is right, to be applied in resolving international disputes. Weak and least developed nations, many of them Islamic nations, are vulnerable and could become easy preys for invasion and colonisation.

6. The events of September 11 that had triggered the war on terrorism were followed by the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq should serve as a loud wake-up call for us Muslim. We can no longer stay disunited if we do not want to fall one by one. Muslims must acquire information, knowledge and technology and keep abreast with the developments in the western world. Malaysia strongly believes that with financial wealth and natural resources at our disposal, Muslim countries can become strong if we manage our internal affairs well.

7. Malaysia believes that terrorism should not be labeled or associated with one faith or group of people. A universally accepted definition of terrorism is vital to enable the international community to counter the scourge effectively. The problem of terrorism must be tackled at source. It is noted that Malaysia and Syria share a common position on the issue of terrorism.

8. The situation in the Middle East remains of great concern to all of us. At the root of this is the Palestinians Israeli conflict. Venting our anger by simply killing people as is done by both sides will solve nothing. We need to know our strength and to strategise so that every sacrifice will contribute towards our ultimate success. A comprehensive peace in the region, however, cannot be achieved without the participation of Syria and Lebanon in the peace process. Malaysia therefore supports and calls for the inclusion of the Golan Heights and Sheba Farm in the Road Map if a permanent peace in the region is to prevail.

9. The U.S. engineered road map for solving the Palestinian problem would have had a better chance of success if Iraq had not been invaded. As it is there is now an Iraqi insurgency in addition to the Palestinian problem. And terrorism still threatens the world.

10. We need a return to multilateralism to put things back on their proper tract.

11. I am pleased to note that Malaysia and Syria share many similar views on issues confronting the international community today and have cooperated meaningfully at various forums such as the United Nations, Non-Aligned Movement, Organisation of Islamic Conference and G-77. My government greatly values the support and contribution made by your government at the last NAM Summit hosted by Malaysia in

February. I am confident that Malaysia would continue to receive Syria's full support and constructive participation at the forthcoming OIC Summit to be held in October in Malaysia

12. Moving to our bilateral relations, I am confident that my visit to Syria, a first by any Malaysian Prime Minister, would herald a new chapter in relations between our two brotherly countries. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1958, bilateral relations have been close and warm. Relations have improved significantly over the past few years. We had a candid and fruitful discussion earlier today. Mutual efforts are being undertaken to enhance the relations further beyond the traditional field of trade, to include other areas such as ICT, culture, education, tourism, human resource development, youth and sports, oil and gas.

13. The signings of MOU on Science and Technology Cooperation and MOU on Statistics Cooperation between our two governments as well as Partnership Agreement in Manufacturing and Know-How Transfer between U.C.T. Sunan

(Malaysia) and the Syrian Telecommunication Establishment during my visit reaffirm our desire to enhance cooperation both at the governmental and private sector level between our two countries.

14. Bilateral trade between Malaysia and Syria is rather small at 67.3 million U.S. Dollars in 2002. Malaysia exported a total of 66.3 million U.S. Dollars to Syria and imported one million U.S. Dollars worth of goods from Syria. We need to balance the trade by importing more from Syria.

15. Currently 158 Malaysian students are pursuing tertiary religious studies in Syria, whilst 27 Syrian students are in Malaysia studying medicine, science and technology, Islamic studies and several other disciplines. The Government of Malaysia would like to extend its appreciation to the Government of Syria for accepting Malaysian students to further their studies in Syria. I would like to invite more Syrian students to pursue their tertiary education in Malaysia.

16. Our history may differ and our past experiences diverse but we share a common destiny. We both aspire to develop and prosper our people. We follow with keen interest the economic reforms that are being undertaken by your government to improve the economic and social well being of your people. As developing countries, Malaysia and Syria should develop strategic alliances and enhance cooperation in areas that could benefit both our countries and peoples. In this direction, Mr. President, within the context of South-South

cooperation and premised on our policy of 'Prosper Thy Neighbour' Malaysia stands ready to share with Syria, under our Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP), our facilities and experiences in governance and development.

17. On that note, Mr. President, once again I would like to express my deepest appreciation and gratitude for the excellent arrangement made and for the generous hospitality extended to my wife and I and members of my delegation throughout our brief but memorable stay in Syria.