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Title : SPEECH AT THE SEMINAR ON BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES IN AFGHANISTAN

His Excellency Dr. Abdullah Abdullah,
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan,

His Excellency Dr. Richard Leete,
Resident Representative of UNDP Malaysia,

YAB Datuk Joseph Salang,
Deputy Foreign Minister of Malaysia,

YBhg. Datuk Rastam Mohd Isa,
Secretary-General
Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia,

YBhg. Dato' Dr. Jamilah Mahmood,
Chairman of MERCY Malaysia,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and gentleman

Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh and a very good morning.

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim

After Independence, many were skeptical and thought Malaysia would fail due to its diverse ethnic makeup of this country then, but we have proven these critics wrong. Of course, there were many ethnic challenges but we have managed to overcome them as a nation. In this regard, Malaysia is ever willing to share its experience with the South-South countries. It is important to realize that there is no one shoe that fit all. We need to realign ourselves based on the circumstances present. Then I believe, we will be able to succeed in our endeavors.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome His Excellency Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and members of the Afghanistan delegation to Malaysia. I am happy that Dr. Abdullah is able to visit Malaysia again. In particular, I am pleased that Dr. Abdullah is in Kuala Lumpur with a large delegation on a specific mission. I consider your visit to Malaysia, especially to attend the Seminar on Business Opportunities in Afghanistan as very important in enhancing further the relations between our two countries. I feel it is equally important for our businessmen to be interested to look at Afghanistan as a place of business opportunities.

2. This Seminar has taken several years to materialize and I am greatly honoured to speak here this morning. Many agencies have worked hard to see to it that this Seminar is finally realised. For this, I must thank UNDP, MATRADE and EPU for their commendable efforts and financial contributions as well as for choosing Malaysia as the venue for the Seminar. I also want to thank all the participants from Afghanistan and Malaysia for participating in this Seminar.

3. The convening of this seminar is indeed timely and useful as it will highlight to the Malaysian business community the current situation in Afghanistan, which is positive. Over the course of the day, you will learn from the Afghanistan officials how the country is charting its course in its process of transformation towards greater peace and stability as well as sustainable development.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

4. On the political front, Malaysia is happy to see that Afghanistan has made significant progress since 2001. The benchmarks as stipulated by the Bonn Agreement, namely the adoption of a new Constitution and the holding of Presidential and Parliamentary elections have been achieved. The success in the democratic process will put Afghanistan on a solid foundation to embark upon national reconciliation, nation building and economic development.

5. At the recent London Conference on Afghanistan, Malaysia welcomed the launching of the new Afghanistan Compact and the Afghanistan National Development Strategy. The two documents have provided the framework for future co-operation between Afghanistan and the international community, as well as setting clear economic and political priorities for the Government of Afghanistan. Malaysia wishes to congratulate the Governments of Afghanistan and the United Kingdom for the success of the Conference which helped in securing pledges totaling USD10.5 billion from the donor community. This demonstrates the international community's commitment, confidence and support for Afghanistan.

6. I am happy to note that many Afghan refugees from neighbouring countries are beginning to return to their homeland. It has been reported that some two million of these people have brought home with them new ideas, capital and entrepreneurial skill to start small businesses.

7. This has led to a recovery of the agricultural sector, some minor services sector and a re-establishment of market institutions. It is also heartening to know that the Government of Afghanistan is stepping up its battle against narcotics in the country.

8. After a long period of conflict leading to massive destruction and the tragic loss of many Afghani lives, I am pleased that Afghanistan can now look forward to a brighter future. The Government of Afghanistan has proven to be deeply committed to improving the country on all fronts. Therefore, there is much opportunity,

business and otherwise, for Malaysia to actively participate in the noble efforts of the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Ladies and gentlemen,

9. Malaysia and Afghanistan enjoy warm and friendly relations. Co-operation between the two countries is not limited to the political sphere but increasingly in the economic sphere. While bilateral trade is relatively small, it has shown a large increase over the last few years. In 2005, total trade jumped by about 40 per cent as compared to 2004.

10. Afghanistan has always been close to the hearts of all Malaysians. We have followed closely the developments in Afghanistan and we have a keen interest in Afghanistan's direction and future. As a gesture of goodwill and support, the Government of Malaysia has been providing financial support since 2003 to assist in ensuring that the Afghanistan Embassy in Kuala Lumpur continues to remain operational.

11. The Government of Malaysia remains committed to assist Afghanistan in its nation building efforts within our means and capacity. In this regard, the Government of Malaysia established an Afghanistan Trust Fund in October 2001 to assist in the reconstruction of Afghanistan with an initial contribution of USD1 million from the Government of Malaysia. Both the Malaysian public and private sector have also contributed to this Fund. From the Fund, a sum of USD550,000 was spent to buy and send humanitarian goods to Afghanistan.

12. Today, I am pleased to announce that the Government of Malaysia has decided to disburse all the money in the Fund to Afghanistan. In this regard, about USD376,000 will be given to the Afghanistan Trust Fund for Reconstruction. Another USD349,000 will be handed over to Mercy Malaysia to fund social projects in Kandahar namely the Vocational Training Centre for Women, Mother and Child Healthcare Centre and Little Caliph Kindergarten.

13. Presently, the main thrust of Malaysia's assistance to Afghanistan is through capacity building. Since 2001, about 140 Afghanistan officials have attended courses under the Malaysian Technical Co-operation Programme (MTCP) in various fields such as civil service administration, finance, education, drug rehabilitation and security. In addition, there are also presently some 43 Afghani students studying in Malaysian institutions of higher learning.

Ladies and gentlemen,

14. Malaysia is very optimistic about Afghanistan's progressive transformation into becoming a stable and strong nation. As Chairman of the OIC, Malaysia is especially looking forward to Afghanistan becoming a more active member of the OIC as well as taking its natural place within the international community.

15. In conclusion, I am confident that today's seminar will go a long way in inspiring further Afghanistan's economic and social progress. I wish you all a beneficial and enlightening seminar.

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim. I am glad to open this Seminar.

Thank you.