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Art a good way to bring people together: Envoy

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BRAZILIAN Ambassador to Malaysia, Mr Sergio Barcellos Telles, believes art is a good way to bring countries and peoples closer together.

The ambassador is an artist who believes in capturing life in its raw form, whether it is a cool, serene kampung scene or one of a hot, bustling city.

"Bilateral ties should not be limited to business. Much more can be done in the cultural area. It is necessary for both nations to get to know each other," he told Business Times in Kuala Lumpur.

One Brazil-Malaysia arts link was the landscaping project for the 20ha Kuala Lumpur City Centre Park, undertaken by the late Brazilian artist Mr Roberto Burle Marx.

When asked about his art talent, Telles modestly said it is nothing when compared with other spectacular talents in the Brazilian Foreign Ministry.

"My colleagues include some famous writers, poets and musicians. There are talented Brazilians and they can also be found in the ministry," he said.

Telles said his dedication to art does not interfere with his work, but rather that it is a boon as most of the people he meets when carrying out his diplomatic duties are interested in culture and the arts.

"Your country is so colourful and the people so hospitable. It was an immediate 'love story' ... seeing the culture and trying to interpret it makes me understand it better," he said, adding that "somehow, the inspiration that one gets from another culture is a form of integration".

What is important, he stresses is that one should absorb what is interesting and good and reject what is not. It is important to remain open-minded, he explained.

Telles said Malaysia is somewhat alike Brazil as it is similar to it in certain ways. For one, both countries have a complex society. Like Malaysia, Brazil has a proud mix of various cultures.

On a more serious note, Telles said that although similar in ways, the two countries had been unaware of each other until only recently, when awareness of the potential in cooperation grew.

Telles says, "We are discovering each other, learning to look South."

"Key factors that led to the strengthening of ties are the visits of Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1991 and 1992 and that of Brazilian President Fernando Henrique in 1995," he said.

"Brazilian businessmen are realising the fantastic economic success of Malaysia under the leadership of Dr Mahathir. They understand the role their Malaysian partners can play as facilitators in trading in the Asean and East Asian markets, including China.

"However, few Brazilian businessmen have come here. The ones who came, though, are fascinated and impressed with what they see," Telles said.

He explained that it is the same with Malaysian businessmen but Japanese investors have been in Brazil for decades.

"For far-sighted businessmen, plenty of opportunities exist beyond the huge Brazilian and South American markets. Brazil has a population of an estimated 164m."

Malaysian investors can explore the opportunities offered by privatization programmes of roads, container ports, telecommunications, the cellular phone and banking sectors.

"They can choose to establish new businesses in some special areas.

"The economy of the state of Minas Gerais, for instance, has been growing at an average rate of 10 per cent in the last three years. It's like an 'Asian tiger in the heart of Brazil'.

"The state of Parana, in southeast Brazil, is excellently positioned to be a launchpad for exports to the markets of neighbouring countries like Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay," he said.

"This has proved to be particularly attractive to carmakers and should be an excellent locale for a new Proton plant in Latin America," he said.

He added that the northeast of Brazil has the fastest-growing tourism industry, due to its proximity to the Canadian and North-American markets, a cheap labour force, healthy investment atmosphere, sunny beaches and perennial good weather.

"We intend to hold the first meeting of the Brazil-Malaysia commercial joint commission in Brazil this year. It will be an excellent forum for the discussion of new ideas to improve ties.

"An agreement for the extension of business visas is in the final phase of negotiations. This will facilitate business travel. Business visas will be valid for several years."

In other areas too there is work to be done.

An air services agreement was signed last December, but there are no direct flights still.

"I hope that the Malaysian and Brazilian airlines will form a profitable partnership in the near future to provide air links to both countries," he added.

As for bilateral trade, Telles said it has been growing steadily. In 1992, bilateral trade was worth some US\$350 million (US\$1 = RM2.48) but this increased to US\$700 million in 1995.

"Last year was a very important year for us. Companhia Brasileira de Projectos e Obras, a giant in dam and civil construction, is part of the consortium that was awarded the main contract to build the Bakun Dam.

"In addition, another Brazilian company, Confab for the second time became a successful participant in the Peninsular Gas Utilisation Programme," he added.

On Brazilian products exported to Malaysia, Telles said iron and steel (in different forms) make up 50 per cent of total exports, which amounted to US\$307 million in 1995.

Other products are car parts, animal feed and paper.

Meanwhile, Brazil bought US\$373 million worth of products from Malaysia in 1995 - comprising telecommunications equipment, natural rubber, integrated circuits and electronic equipment.

Telles says he is convinced Malaysian cars will be a hit in Brazil and other neighbouring South American countries.

He advised that for this to come about, there is a need to follow the likes of others (Mercedes Benz, Toyota, Hyundai and Renault) which are opening plants in Brazil and already produce 1.4 million cars and 300,000 buses and trucks a year there.