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Council steps up efforts to enhance bilateral ties

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THE Australia Malaysia Business Council (AMBC) is stepping up its efforts to promote bilateral trade and investment with a series of seminars, meetings and social functions to promote the idea among the Australian community to venture into Malaysia - the gateway to Asia.

There is little doubt among Australians that Malaysia is an ideal springboard to regional markets catering for hundreds of millions of people in Asia.

The 300-member AMBC is encouraged by the support it is getting from the Australian Government as illustrated by the number of successful ministerial visits between Australia and Malaysia.

Both the Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Trade Minister Tim Fischer and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer as well as Education Minister Senator Amanda Vanstone have given considerable focus to the Malaysian relationship.

AMBC national president Paul McClintock, while pleased with the way his council is functioning, is obviously disappointed that Prime Minister John Howard has not been able to schedule a visit to Malaysia this year.

No doubt this is also a disappointment for Howard who is keen to return a visit made by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in March last year, soon after Howard's big election victory.

McClintock, a former Howard adviser, now expects a Howard visit to Kuala Lumpur early next year.

AMBC is looking forward to the visit as there is an understanding with the Prime Minister's office in Canberra that the business council will be given an opportunity to organise trade and investment activities around Howard's visit.

More importantly, the Australian business people would dearly like to see an official visit to this country by Or Mahathir.

AMBC is working with its Malaysian counterpart - the Malaysia Australia Business Council- to encourage Dr Mahathir to come to Australia where he is assured of a warm welcome.

McClintock, the chairman of Plutonic Resources Ltd, the Malaysian Mining Corporation-backed blue chip gold miner, says some differences remain between Australia and Malaysia on the role Australia should play in the Asian region.

However, these differences have been dealt with professionally and do not appear to be disrupting the warmth of the general relationship.

He wants his business council to encourage a continuing dialogue on these issues to see whether they can be resolved.

The backbone of the national AMBC is its state chapters of which Victoria, under the leadership of Mr V.T. Lingam, is the best known, having organised numerous trade and investment missions to Malaysia over several years.

Lingam, a successful entrepreneur, is well known to the Minister for International Trade and Industry, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz.

He makes frequent trips to Malaysia from his base in Melbourne to help facilitate joint venture deals.

The Queensland chapter, spearheaded by Malaysian millionaires Peter Yeoh Tiong Yong (president) and Maha Sinnathamby (vice-president), is doing an excellent job of developing a high-profile group of Queensland business people to promote bilateral trade.

They have easy access to the State Premier Rob Borbidge and other ministers as well as the State Opposition Leader Peter Beattie who is tipped to win office in the next state election.

In Adelaide, accountant Winston Pestana, a member of the famous Malaysian rugby family, was recently elected president for the fifth year.

Pestana is actively involved with the South Australian Government in keeping the business community informed on the merits and rewards in investing in Malaysia.

Pestana has close contacts with the State Government of Premier John Olsen.

Not much is heard from the New South Wales, Western Australian and Northern Territory chapters, but it is believed that they are active in promoting trade and investment in Malaysia.

The Northern Territory has a strong relationship with Sabah, Sarawak as well as Peninsular Malaysia.

Malaysia and Australia are fortunate to have dedicated and hard-working High Commissioners in Canberra and Kuala Lumpur respectively who are keenly interested in encouraging business between the two friendly countries.

Australian High Commissioner Bob Cotton recently visited most state capital cities in Australia, telling business and professionals of the wonderful investment opportunities available in Malaysia.

He was most enthusiastic about the remarkable and impressive development and progress that is so evident in Malaysia.

Cotton, who had served in Malaysia as Deputy High Commissioner about 10 years ago, said Australian business people should be aware of the speed Malaysia was travelling down the industrialisation track. His briefings were well-attended.

Malaysian High Commissioner in Canberra, Dato Adnan Othman is out and about in the vast continent of Australia, whipping up interest among the Australians for his "beloved Malaysia".

He is a popular and willing speaker at seminars, business luncheons and other events.

Yesterday, Adnan flew to Melbourne from Canberra to meet business and corporate leaders before attending a grand dinner organised by the AMBC, Victoria, to mark the 40th anniversary of Malaysia's independence.

It was held at the Malaysian-owned Eden on the Park Hotel.

Entertainment was provided by dancers from Chandrabhanu's Bharatam Dance Company and traditional Malay dances by students from Monash University.

AMBC national president McClintock is confident his organisation will continue to grow with the support it is receiving from several quarters including leading business houses in Australia.

"There is no reason why the AMBC should not be one of the largest and most successful of the bilateral councils in Australia," he says.

There is no doubt this will be achieved in the next couple of years.

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