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Cuba seeking to improve trade ties

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Cuba, under United States trade sanctions for the past 35 years, is seeking closer economic ties with other countries and has singled out Malaysia as a potential investment and trade partner.

Cuban Foreign Minister Roberto Robaina Gonzalez said his country's decision in 1994 to open up its economy and forge closer economic partnership with other countries was taken partly to resist US sanctions but mainly to develop itself by having strong trade ties with other nations.

"And I believe in this part of the world we can count on Malaysia," he said when he began his five-day official visit to Malaysia with a tour of the Technology Park in Bukit Jalil.

He described the purpose of his visit as "fact finding" and to explain to Malaysia Cuba's process of opening up its economy with a view to attracting more foreign investments and also to embark on measures to enable both countries to share their experiences.

"By learning more about each other we can have better relations. We do not want just formal ties, we want to have a practical relationship since there are many sectors that we are interested in and there are areas that could be of interest to you," he said.

During his visit to the Technology Park, he was briefed on highlights of the park by the General Manager of its Information Technology Division and was later taken on a tour of the facilities where he was briefed by its Prototype and Production Manager Mohamad Zaihirain Mohamed Rasin.

Tomorrow, the Cuban Minister is scheduled to pay a courtesy call on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and also meet Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat.

Robaina said he had brought with him a letter from Cuban President Fidel Castro which he would hand over to Dr Mahathir tomorrow. He did not elaborate on the contents of the letter.

He said Cuba was willing to co-operate in all fields and singled out the biotechnology and pharmaceutical fields where he said his country had made significant progress.

Asked to comment on the effects of the US Helms-Burton law, he said Washington was mistaken if it thought it could impose laws on other countries which were enacted in the US.

"We simply want to remind the US that its Congress can pass laws but for any law to be effective in Cuba, it has to be passed in Cuba and not in the US. Fortunately, the world is not just the US. We believe we can be independent in our economic policy and have trade ties with other countries," he said.

US President John F. Kennedy imposed a trade embargo on Cuba on Feb 3, 1962, which has been maintained by eight subsequent US presidents in a bid to punish and weaken Castro who came to power in 1959.

By enacting the Helms-Burton law last year, President Bill Clinton signed away the authority to lift the sanctions by executive order. The law lays down conditions for the lifting of the embargo, among them, the holding of free elections.

Urging Malaysian entrepreneurs to invest in his country, Robaina said Cuba had a foreign investment law which was sufficiently wide and open in every sector except health and education, which would continue to be in

the hands of the public sector.

He said the sugar industry, tourism, nickel production, fisheries, citrus fruit processing, bio-technology and pharmaceuticals were among the industries which had good joint venture potential.

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