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Eradicating poverty: Cuba keen to learn from Malaysia

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MALAYSIA'S success in its rural development and agricultural policies has caught the attention of Cuba, and the country is keen to incorporate these elements in its development programmes.

Cuban Foreign Minister Roberto Robaina Gonzalez expressed this during a one-hour meeting with his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, at Wisma Putra yesterday.

Briefing reporters later, Abdullah said Cuba is fascinated with Malaysia's experiences in eradicating poverty, particularly through the concept of developing land schemes into commercial plantations for smallholders.

"We have implemented the Federal Land Development Authority (Felda) concept to boost the earnings of rural folks. The concept looks attractive to Cuba," he added.

Abdullah said Malaysia is willing to assist should Cuba want to implement a Felda-like concept there as part of its efforts to eradicate poverty.

He noted that oil palm holds potential in Cuba because the country has a climate similar to Malaysia's.

"Through such a concept, the rural people will have the opportunity to own and develop plantation land with strong economic potential. This allows them to be involved in the country's agricultural sector," he added.

Abdullah said that during the meeting, Robaina extended President Fidel Castro's invitation to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to visit Cuba.

In addition, Robaina expressed his country's interest in setting up a diplomatic office in Kuala Lumpur. At present, Cuba has such an office only in Laos.

Abdullah said: "We welcome such a proposal. It is only a natural step to have such an office when a bilateral relations reach a higher level. It will further facilitate trade and investment between the two countries."

Robaina, who arrived in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday, is leading a five-man delegation on a five-day visit to Malaysia.

Later yesterday, he and his delegation paid a visit to the National Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (NCCIM), where he met representatives of local companies.

Robaina told them that the setting up of a Cuban mission in Malaysia will play a very important role in promoting closer trade and investment ties between the two countries.

"We are aware that the inexistence of such a mission in Malaysia poses a major difficulty for Malaysian businessmen to visit Cuba. We are trying to change the situation," he said.

Robaina said Malaysian investors should come to Cuba and establish business in the country as soon as possible so that they can take the advantage of being in Cuba first against other competitors.

"We admire your hardworking habits, professionalism and the manner in which you undertake your business. We welcome you to Cuba," he added.

He said there are many opportunities for foreign businessmen in Cuba as laws for new investments have opened up all sectors of the economy, except for health and education.

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