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Fostering ties with Mediterranean nations

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RECENTLY Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad visited Lebanon and during his visit, he was given the country's highest award.

When I was in Morocco, I recalled the meeting that took place between the two Prime Ministers when they attended the OIC meeting in Casablanca. There was rapport between the two leaders and a commitment to enhance cooperation.

The area around Lebanon has been known as a centre of civilisation.

It is noted recently that the region has begun to appreciate the ties that bind the region together.

At the time of the Prime Minister's visit to Lebanon, the Mediterranean Games was held, fostering closer relations between the countries.

A Mediterranean regional conference has also come about, aimed at bringing together Mediterranean Europe and North Africa.

The region has now accepted with a sense of pride the civilisations associated with the Phoenician, the Egyptians, Greeks and the Romans.

These civilisations have played important roles in the development of the Mediterranean and the world.

Malaysia has had close diplomatic ties with many Mediterranean countries since early independence. However, relations with the Spanish-speaking countries came somewhat late.

When Spain established its Kuala Lumpur embassy in 1985, it was a landmark event. It heralded the opening up of the Spanish-speaking world to Malaysia.

At that time, I was the head of the centre for diplomacy and international relations in INTAN. Realising the need to give exposure to Spain, I organised a seminar to introduce the country to leading Malaysians in the public and private sectors.

When introducing the Ambassador, I referred to the importance of the tourism industry. I said that Spain had about 40 million visitors annually. Before I could finish, the Ambassador had corrected me, saying that the figure was 60 million!

When I was the Ambassador to Morocco, I took the opportunity to visit the port city of Tangier on the Mediterranean.

The city has an interesting past, and a cosmopolitan character, with various nationals residing in the area. These include Americans, Spaniards, British, French, Italians and others.

The architecture of the city reflects the varied background of the occupying powers.

Peace reigns at present and a plan is afoot to build a bridge connecting Tangiers to a site near Algeciras. It will be a historical moment as the bridge will provide a link between Europe and Africa.

Like all neighbouring countries, there were conflicts between Morocco and Spain. Nowadays, the two countries have become close friends. Both countries share the music, dance and architecture associated with Andalusia. Southern Spain has some architectural wonders, including the Islamic masterpiece, the Alhambra.

I was also fortunate to be accredited to Tunisia. It gave me the opportunity to visit the charming city of Tunis, in particular the renowned ancient city of Carthage, which is now a suburb of the capital city.

The ruins around Carthage reflected the importance of the city at

various intervals and the role played by the Phoenicians and the Romans.

Then there are the more recent buildings of the Ottoman Empire.

The Mediterranean region has a collection of some of the world's fascinating cities such as Cairo, Istanbul, Athens, Venice, Rome and others.

The region has produced some of the world's most intrepid travellers and explorers. When I was Tangiers, I took the opportunity to visit the mausoleum of Ibn Batutta, a renowned traveller who had journeyed far and wide, including to the Malay archipelago.

The cooperation between the countries of the Mediterranean region is a welcome development.

It had had a turbulent history. Recently there have been problems facing the European and North African segments of the Mediterranean, mainly associated with economic disparity.

Now it appears that the whole region is anxious to work together so that the economy of the region will develop and prosper.

The region should be of interest to Asean. In the past, countries of the two regions have had their ups and downs and have contributed to the identity and the way of life there.

In our part of the world, too, kingdoms associated with Malacca, Srivijaya, the Angkor Wat, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam have had their highs and lows.

Cooperation between the two regions would be a powerful step in fostering and enriching human civilisations.

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