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Getting Malaysians to explore trade in Mongolia and Krygystan

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"MSC doesn't just stand for Multimedia Super Corridor," said one of the younger politicians in the 170-member delegation led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Mongolia and Kyrgystan last week.

"It also stands for Mahathir's Super Charm," he said.

The politician, a rising star himself, was full of admiration for the Prime Minister. This was the first time he was invited on an official trip with Dr Mahathir and he was, he admitted, immensely impressed.

"The man knows what he wants for the country," the young politician said. Throughout the two-nation visit from Sept 8 to 13, it was clear to all what the Prime Minister was pushing for.

"And he never strayed from that path. From capital to capital, in every speech he made, in all the discussions formal and informal, he tirelessly explored areas in which trade and economic ties could be built between Malaysian businessmen and those in Mongolia and Kyrgystan.

"I am amazed by his stamina, determination and guts," said the politician.

Another member of the delegation, also following Dr Mahathir for the first time, said:

"I don't think businessmen from any other country have a political leader who would do this for them. I hope they don't expect to be spoon-fed like this all the way."

Indeed, by the time the special Malaysia Airlines plane carrying Dr Mahathir and his entourage touched down at Subang early yesterday morning, he had managed to persuade Mongolians to seriously consider Malaysia as a potential trading partner.

The Prime Minister also won over the Kyrgystanis with his assurances to help them in their undoubtedly difficult transition to a market-type economy.

Whether or not Dr Mahathir was able to persuade the business folk who trudged up and down the picturesque hills of Bishkek or the wide, open plains of Ulan Bator, it is not known.

First of all, the precarious economic situation here, as a result of currency instabilities throughout Asia, may have blunted somewhat the desire to seek trade partners abroad.

Perhaps the fact that Mongolia, with its frigid weather and small domestic market (2.5 million population), is about 35 years behind us in terms of infrastructure development may also be another discouraging factor for the Malaysian business folk.

Language may also be another barrier. And bureaucratic bottlenecks can create unnecessary hassles and frustrations. In Kyrgystan, for instance, it took some delegates about 20 minutes to cash traveller's cheques.

"Let's not focus on the obstacles," said Datuk Hassan Harun, chairman and chief executive officer of KUB Malaysia Berhad.

"We should instead see this as an adventure, a challenge.

"When Japan or, for that matter, the East India Company sailed in our direction looking for spice and other trading items, they didn't look at the obstacles. They saw the potentials. We should do the same," he said.

"If I were younger," he said during a tour of a run-down bakery in Osh City, a 40-minute plane ride south of Bishkek, "I would come here, stay a year or two to study their way of life and embark on some trading or business venture."

Others interviewed weren't as enthusiastic. "They (the Kyrgystani businessmen) were proud to show us their industries but, really, these were too small to consider. We only deal with huge businesses," said one corporate bigwig.

Perhaps, knowing this to be a barrier for some, Dr Mahathir advised the Malaysian businessmen to look beyond the country's domestic market.

In Mongolia's case, he urged them to consider the country's neighbours - Russia in the west and China in the east.

Mongolia has direct rail links with Russia and China, so Malaysian traders, he said, would be able to use duty-free warehouses as distribution centres into these two countries.

As it is, one Malaysian company - Sriwani Holdings Bhd - is preparing to build such centres on Mongolia's border with its two giant neighbours.

Other Malaysian companies taking brave steps into Mongolia are Malaysian Electrical Corp, Gibca Holdings Sdn Bhd which will upgrade, rehabilitate and change the water treatment facilities in and around Ulan Bator, as well as the Malaysian Mining Corporation which is making some arrangement with its Mongolian partners to rehabilitate the Egiin Gol Power Station.

The fact that Mongolia has sought Malaysia's assistance to conduct a feasibility study on an inland port would also, in the long-term, help Malaysian businessmen.

All this was carefully explained to both the businessmen and the media by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, in the hope that our business people would be amendable to doing trade in Mongolia.

In Kyrgystan, the handing over of a joint economic report or, as Dr Mahathir called it, an "economic road map" to identify potential areas for foreign investment, will certainly see a closer working relation between the two nations.

As pointed out by one Malaysian delegate, "It isn't just what we bring that is attractive to these people. It is also the sharing of what we have gone through which is important for them. If we can do it, I am sure they believe they can too."

Dr Mahathir himself spoke about this in his many speeches in Bishkek but he also reminded the Kyrgystanis that the change in Malaysia's economic profile did not happen overnight. Mindsets and attitudes had to be changed. A sense of urgency had to be inculcated.

Equally important was the courage and openness to try new ways of doing things. And if there were failures along the way, he said, there should be a desire to learn and try again.

All this would have remained hollow rhetoric if Dr Mahathir had not so clearly revealed his fighting spirit at the close of his four-day visit to Mongolia.

When asked during a Press conference whether Malaysia's investments abroad and in Mongolia specifically would be affected by the currency problems in Asia, he said, quite openly and without hesitation, that it would "slightly" but "we would still manage".

Honest and reassuring words, not just for the Mongolians and Kyrgystanis but also the Malaysian businessmen who were part of his delegation.

For in the end, it is this ability to take stock, to be pragmatic in times of difficulties, to pull back when necessary, to reassess goals and deadlines, and to remain steadfast in our vision which tells our friends both old and new that Malaysia is a dependable partner in trade and other matters.

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