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Link to boost KL-Jakarta ties

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AT the recent meeting of the Group of Eight Islamic countries in Istanbul, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was reported to have discussed with President Suharto of Indonesia a project to build a bridge across the Straits of Malacca between Malaysia and Sumatra. The points to be connected will probably be somewhere in Malacca and the island adjacent to Dumai.

I was excited about the report. Fifteen years ago, I was appointed Consul General in Medan, Sumatra. During my three-year stay, I visited six of the eight provinces of Sumatra, including Dumai in the province of Riau. The link between the two countries would naturally propel the development of the adjacent lands connecting the two points. Years ago, I had already noticed the hive of commercial activities around Dumai.

Riau is an interesting province where the last Malacca Sultan was buried. There is petroleum in the province and only Malaysia has a consulate there. When I was in the province, I visited the oil field and an abandoned palace on an island on the river Siak. This palace, a mini Versailles, had been abandoned and contained period furniture of 19th century Europe. It's amazing how items were brought to the East in those days. There were pictures of the members of the royal family and the Dutch colonialists in their full evening outfits.

With the link, Malaysians and Indonesians will be able to travel easily to each other's country. Malaysians will be able to visit interesting cities such as Banda Aceh, Medan, Bukit Tinggi, Padang and Palembang. These cities have historical connections with Malaysia. The two countries would naturally foster closer economic links either in the agriculture or manufacturing industry. Just outside Medan is the site of Inalum, one of Asia's largest aluminium plants. Malaysia will be familiar with palm oil which is grown in abundance in Sumatra especially around Medan.

I remember Medan well. It was while I was there that Medan became the twin city of Penang. Leading personalities from both the public and private sector used to visit each others' capitals regularly. As Consul General, I used to host large delegations from Penang when they arrived to participate at the annual Medan Fair. Penang used to have a pavilion there, the only outsider to have one. I found it challenging to be involved with Penang's participation, including giving ideas in the design of exhibition hall and stage for the performance by the visiting Penang cultural troupes.

The work of the Consul General was always busy. There was at least one delegation a week from Malaysia. Those who came included school teachers and children, police and military, cultural troupes, film artistes, women's associations, youth groups and sporting bodies. On occasions, I was the first to toss the basketball, be in the boxing ring to start off a match and participated at badminton, tennis and golf compositions with our delegation.

Medan is in the province of Sumatra Utara (SUMUT). I travelled extensively to the north to see the Asean fertiliser plant at Loksemawe and I also visited the area which was reported to be the site of Samudra Pasai, the location of the early islamic kingdom in South East Asia. At P. Ramlee's picturesque ancestral village, Aceh, I was warmly welcomed. P. Ramlee was popular in Indonesia as well as in his home country.

Malaysians will find Sumatra an exciting place where traditional music,

the drums and the Serunai are well preserved.

There are a number of interesting tourist places for Malaysians to visit such as Danau Toba, an island which is bigger than Singapore, and the volcanic wonders of Sumatra.

The bridge will boost many trading and cultural links between Indonesia and Malaysia. I recall a visit to Batam island just south of Singapore when it was just beginning to take off. The growth triangle with Singapore, Johor and Riau will be further strengthened. In the not-too-distant future, continental Asean will be closely linked to the islands of Asean.

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