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NZ enhances its Asian links

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New Zealand is aiming to build even closer links with its neighbours especially the Asian countries. Under its Asia 2000 Foundation, New Zealand is trying to develop its people's knowledge and understanding of the countries and peoples of Asia.

"We don't take our neighbours for granted. There is a new emphasis on building relations between New Zealand and the Asian countries," New Zealand High Commissioner to Malaysia Mr Timothy Hannah told Business Times in Kuala Lumpur.

"But I can say that our relations with the countries of Asia are, with rarest exceptions, extremely positive," he said.

At the governmental level, there is very active cooperation and consultation and this is paralleled by thriving and growing linkages in business and trade as well as people-to-people contact.

Hannah said six of New Zealand's 10 top partners are in Asia. Malaysia is one of them.

One third of New Zealand's tourists come from Asia. More than half of its immigrants come from this part of the world as well. Some 90 per cent of the country's overseas students are from Asia.

"Asia is New Zealand's neighbourhood. We aren't part of Europe or America and our Government policies have reflected this for some time," he said.

Hannah said that with such an attitude, he foresees a strong and dynamic growth in cooperation between New Zealand and countries of the region.

"We are working at two or three levels to support trade and investments with our Asian neighbours."

To support trade and investment with Asia, New Zealand has an open economy - outward-looking in terms of trade and economic objectives seeking to free restrictions on the movement of people, capital, and goods and services.

There is less red tape and obstacles, if any, in the way of investing or establishing a business in New Zealand, whether its a bank or a small factory, according to Hannah.

"There has been some dramatic reforms in the New Zealand economy in recent years and this has made us a more interesting partner in trade and investment. We rank among the top in international competitiveness surveys," he said.

To support trade and investments, New Zealand is also working with countries in the region through the World Trade Organisation, and in particular, through the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec).

"At the High Commission, we are constantly involved in promoting contact between Malaysians and our business people which will result in business alliances," he said.

Malaysia is New Zealand's 11th largest source of imported products. There was an increase of 11 per cent in 1996 as compared to the previous year. Meanwhile, Malaysia is New Zealand's 10th largest export market which saw an increase of 9 per cent as compared to the previous year.

There have also been a number of bilateral investment ventures. The largest venture to date is by the New Zealand forestry and paper company, Fletcher Challenge, which is in partnership with local companies, including the New Straits Times Group to build a newsprint mill in Pahang.

"In the High Commission, we get involved in many activities and other

business developments where the principals look to us for advice, business contact or other assistance.

"We are also active in the trade commission, organising special individual trade contacts, support for specialised trade missions and participation in trade fairs," he said.

Hannah added that a special area of focus is on the promotion of the education sector - the opportunities for study in New Zealand. Very often, these are under collaborative arrangements with Malaysian institutions.

"Our universities and other schools have a world-wide reputation for a quality education and tuition and living costs are lower than other more traditional destinations for Malaysians."

On the travel and tourism area, visitor arrivals in New Zealand from Malaysia is currently growing at a healthy 15 per cent annually.

About 15,000 Malaysian tourists have visited New Zealand each year over the past three years.

Hannah added that a Government initiative that can help relations was the Working Holiday Arrangement signed last year when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad visited New Zealand.

The arrangement provides a reciprocal opportunity for young Malaysians and New Zealanders to visit each other's country for up to six months, to work and holiday there.