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US-Malaysia relations on uptrend, says envoy

Adeline Ong

RELATIONS between the US and Malaysia is on the uptrend, US Ambassador to Malaysia, Mr John Malott, said yesterday.

Speaking at a press conference at the Balai Berita in Kuala Lumpur yesterday, Malott said there has been a clear positive improvement in relations between the US and Malaysia since 1994.

"It is like the stock market. Some days it goes up and some days it goes down.

"From 1994, it has gone up and up and up.

"The trendline is quite clearly up and I expect it to continue that way.

"We are also establishing a more broad-based relationship," he said after a visit to the New Straits Times Press.

Malott said bilateral ties is the base of the relationship. The US is Malaysia's largest export market and number one investor in terms of cumulative investment.

"Most Malaysians tell me that they think American companies are the best at transfer of technology, hiring Malaysians and promoting them. We produce goods in Malaysia that are in a higher technological level than other countries.

"The facts may not be known but my point here is that the economic relationship is the basic foundation of our relationship ... but it is broadening out," he said.

He said the strengthening of ties can be seen in the increasing port visits made by US navy ships, more Malaysian military officers going to the US to study and more American forces to train together with their Malaysian counterparts.

"Our defence cooperation is expanding. We are also seeing better cooperation on foreign policy issues.

"A year ago, the two biggest irritants in our relationship were Bosnia and the East Asia Economic Caucus. Now, no one talks about them," he added.

"We are having better discussions, closer consultations on regional foreign policies issues. We have also gone together in law enforcement," Malott said.

Both countries are working closely to combat dadah trafficking.

Malott said the US is also happy that Malaysia has agreed to sign the proposed Information Technology Agreement (ITA) in July, adding that it is a case where Malaysia has clearly understood where its interests lie.

"At the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meetings in Singapore, it was sometimes easy to portray trade discussions as somehow a political conflict. To me, trade is not a North-South issue.

"Malaysia is one of the top 20 trading nations of the world. Its leading trading partners are in the so-called North.

"If you look at this issue from the point of view of business, trade and economics, and the fact that Malaysia is one of the leading producers of information technology (IT) products, and the world's largest exporter of semiconductors, it is very logical for Malaysia to sign the ITA," said Malott.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said in San Francisco on January 18 Malaysia will sign the ITA once it is satisfied that it will not be disadvantaged by it.

The ITA is aimed at being a multilateral mechanism to liberalise the

industry and eliminate, where possible, global barriers in the areas of telecommunication and information technology.

"I also think it is very logical down the road for Malaysia to make an offer in the WTO telecommunications talks.

"Malaysia is increasingly moving up the high-tech ladder, becoming more and more sophisticated in terms of products and services it is providing, promoting the Multimedia Super Corridor ... all which means that telecommunications trade and services are now more open."

On the new US Secretary of State Madeline Albright's policies, Malott said Albright has been a professor of international relations and has a clear understanding on how to set priorities.

"She is smart enough not to be sidetracked by what we call these days the `CNN Agenda'. Just because CNN has a camera there does not make it the single most important thing that is happening in the world.

Albright's first trip overseas will be a combined trip to Europe and Asia because US interests are in both directions.

Malott said that Albright will be a very effective and articulate for the US whether she is talking to foreign audience or Americans.

"She has shown that she can express herself clearly and will `tell it like it is'. She also said she is not prepared to allow any issue to hold our other interest hostage.

Malott said Malaysia will probably not be included in Albright's first trip due to time constraint. He expected her first time will focus on North East Asia (Japan and South Korea).

He expected Albright to visit Malaysia in July because she will lead the US delegation to Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean), the Asean Post Ministerial Conference and the Asean Regional Forum on Security.

Meanwhile, Malott said the number one concern of American businessmen in Malaysia is the shortage of labour.

"Managers spend a lot of time trying to look for workers, recruit and keep them.

That is their main concern. I have also raised their concerns about immigration and work permits because at least in the case of assembly line workers, there is a system that allows companies to import workers.

Therefore, he said, American companies would be happy if immigration policies are liberalised to make it easier to bring in managerial workers.

On the dwindling education ties, Malott said that the US is not so concerned but would look forward to having more Malaysians studying post-graduate studies instead of undergraduate studies there.

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