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A rich learning experience for both countries

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"HUNGARY is rich in National Days, we have at least three," says Hungarian Ambassador Istvan Debreceni with a laugh, while explaining the significance of the celebration on March 15.

The first official National Day is Aug 20, which marks the date of Hungary's first Christian King, Stephen, and the founding of the first Hungarian State.

Hungary celebrates its 1,000th anniversary - or the Magyar Millennium - in the year 2000.

March 15 marks the outbreak of the revolution of 1848. Hungary then was fighting for its independence from the Habsburgs rule and the right of self-determination.

"Although it was unsuccessful, it was not totally useless.

"It was for us the war for our independence, we wanted to modernise, to create a civil society and end feudalism in our country," says Debreceni.

Finally, Oct 23 commemorates the proclamation of the Republic of Hungary in 1989.

"So, after more than 100 years Hungary has managed to fulfil the goals of the 1848 revolution and today we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the March 15th revolution," says the ambassador.

Hungary, like many countries that have emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union, is changing from a centrally controlled economy to a market-driven economy and is considered one of the most successful.

The country is also re-integrating itself as a part of Europe. Hungary, along with Poland and the Czech Republic have been invited to join Nato in April next year, on the 50th anniversary of the formation of the alliance.

Hungary decided to hold a referendum on joining Nato last year, even though this was not necessary according to its constitution nor was it required by Nato.

More than 85 per cent of the votes backed the country's decision to join Nato and all five opposition parties in the Parliament also backed the membership.

"The Hungarian people have been fighting for independence for many years and we wanted the assurance that we can stabilise.

"The overwhelming majority vote showed how important our stability and independence is to our people," says Debreceni.

This year, Hungary will begin talks with the European Union for its entry into the grouping. The ambassador expects that this will happen sometime after the year 2000.

According to the ambassador, Hungary has worked very hard and continues to work towards achieving the conditions of the EU membership.

Their debt ratio to Gross Domestic Product is 64 per cent and to qualify for the EU it must be 60 per cent. Hungary's current account deficit is 4.6 per cent and the EU allows three per cent.

However, their inflation rate is at 18 per cent and it has to be below 1.3 per cent to qualify.

"That is an area we have to work on. But after so many years of being outside of Europe, Hungarians will work hard to join the EU because being a member of the EU is key to European integration," explains Debreceni.

The ambassador says in the early years of independence from the Soviet Union, his country paid more attention towards Europe and didn't realise that it had to pay attention to other parts of the world.

It was Prime Minister Gyula Horn who decided that Southeast Asia was a dynamic and important region and that Hungary should learn more about its experiences.

"Last year saw an increase in the already close and friendly relations between our two countries. There were three high-level contacts and they have laid the foundation for even closer ties," says Debreceni.

Horn had visited Malaysia in April last year. During the visit an agreement of scientific and technological co-operation was signed and a memorandum of understanding on mutual co-operation on trade promotion.

In May, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar and the Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Najihah were on an official five-day visit to Hungary.

And in June, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in Hungary for a two-day working visit.

During the visit, Dr Mahathir witnessed the signing of a memorandum of understanding linking the Multimedia Super Corridor and Hungary's Infopark RT.

"We are following up on all the agreements and MoUs since then. In fact, under the Science and Technology agreement, some are beginning to be implemented and the first project can be approved by the middle of this year," Debreceni says.

Trade between the two countries have been improving in the past few years, though not as rapidly as it could, says Debreceni. In 1997, total trade amounted to US\$127 million (RM508 million). Malaysia's exports to Hungary were US\$116 million and imports were US\$11 million.

"It is heavily in Malaysia's favour but hopefully we can improve on it," he adds with a smile.

Tourism is also an area that is still largely untapped between the two countries. Debreceni says that both countries are working towards encouraging tourists from each other's countries.

"Next month, a Hungarian television crew will visit Malaysia to make a promotional film. This is because, since the visit of Dr Mahathir and Malaysia's King and Queen, Hungarians are very much interested in Malaysia.

"Our first King, Stephen I, once said that a country that is homogenous and uniform is a poor country.

"I hope that the people of our countries can learn the richness of each other's countries," says Debreceni.

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