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Getting Africa's act together

THERE is both truth and wisdom in what Ebeneza Essoka, the executive director of Standard Chartered Bank Zimbabwe, says about why the rest of the world's perception of Africa has not changed. To them it is still the Dark Continent, impoverished and famished, and torn to shreds by civil strife. But Essoka cannot lay the blame squarely on the power of the international media and the editors in certain countries who appear to want their readers and viewers to see only Africa's pitiful side. Yes, they may be held partly responsible for painting grim pictures of Africa. But they are not responsible for the wars and the weather.

It will take Africa quite a while and a collective will to shed the images of hungry mouths and empty bowls, of bloody tribal clashes and coups and obese dictators. Fortunately for us, Malaysian investors have already found out the advantages of doing business in Africa, despite the negative pictures in the news. This is simply because Africa is a good place to invest in, with abundant labour force, raw materials and a huge market. In less than a decade, Malaysia has become one of the largest investors in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Tanzania and several other African markets. However, compared with the others, Malaysian investors are new kids on the block. Investors from the industrialised countries discovered the massive wealth of this continent centuries ago. Yes, Africa may be all the terrible things that the international media makes it out to be, but that did not influence the descendants of the colonial masters in South Africa to end apartheid until early this decade - with much international pressure. Vast tracts of fertile land in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia and elsewhere in the continent are still owned by migrants whose forefathers had come from what are today the world's industrialised countries.

Yet the natives of Africa are mostly poor and hungry because investments were made not necessarily for their benefits. Malaysia, however, has long made it a policy to prosper its neighbours and ensured that its investors behave as good corporate citizens in their host countries. Now and then we hear of Malaysian companies abroad who give the country a bad name, but generally Malaysians have behaved well. Telekom Malaysia, one of our largest investors in Africa, has built such a positive reputation for itself in some of the countries that leaders of other African states who met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Africa recently wanted the company to invest in their markets. In terms of trade, Malaysia has taken conscious efforts to boost its exports to this continent and also buy more in the name of South-South cooperation. Despite arguments that there was no traffic between Africa and South-East Asia, Malaysia Airlines started services to pave the way for future cooperation.

However, with the regional crises putting the sudden brakes on Malaysia's economic progress, a lot of its investments and economic cooperation with African states have to be put on hold. The focus has to be on consolidating the domestic economy first. Even then the investments which have been committed to by Malaysian companies are being honoured. Malaysia did not pack up and leave the continent. In fact, Dr Mahathir said at the Southern Africa International Dialogue in Walvis Bay, Namibia, recently that once the economy recovered Malaysian companies will head back to Africa.

The point made by South Africa executive vice-president Thabo Mbeki,

about the need for African leaders to stop fighting and start building their continent, remains very pertinent. Until they agree to stop the fighting, Africa will remain in turmoil and cannot hope to solve its own problems or spruce up its image. In the meantime, it needs to make the best out of the investments and economic cooperation that it has secured and work to ensure that South-South cooperation can resume full-force once again. Africa has a voice in many international and regional forums. With the recognition that what is happening to developing countries in Asia can also happen to countries in Africa, economies in Africa can help with the cause that some of its friends in Asia are championing.

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