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Maintaining solidarity in a globalised environment

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IN TODAY'S world of globalisation, solidarity is one thing that developing countries have to maintain, said Cuban Ambassador to Malaysia Lic Teresita Fernandez Diaz.

Cuba, famous for its cigars which are said to be the best in the world, is currently facing economic difficulties resulting from the US economic isolation since President Fidel Castro let Russian missiles be positioned on the island.

"I think solidarity is what Malaysia is practising right now with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to the African countries as well as Japan in order to try and improve relations in both diplomatic and economic contexts," she said in an interview with Business Times recently.

Diaz said that both countries have a common approach in their fight for political sovereignty and economic independence.

Although the diplomatic relationship between Malaysia and Cuba was born in 1975, the Embassy of Cuba was only set up in Kuala Lumpur last September, following Dr Mahathir's visit to the Latin American country earlier in the same month.

"We are just a baby here but I think that in 14 months we have managed to establish a good working policy. I am not saying that we are completely satisfied; we Cubans are never satisfied.

"I think that Malaysians can never be satisfied as well because everytime they reach the top they want to go ahead and climb the next mountain," Diaz said.

Dr Mahathir's first visit to Cuba - the only communist state in the Caribbean/Latin American region - was made to establish Malaysia's first high-level contact with revolutionary leader Fidel Castro and explore opportunities for trade and investment.

Three agreements - one on visa abolition, the second on promotion and reciprocal protection of investments and the third on trade - were signed during the visit to mark the beginning of a new phase in Malaysia-Cuba relations.

The Prime Minister's visit to Cuba was part of his 11-day South American tour which included Chile, Uruguay and Argentina.

Although Malaysia is currently facing an economic slowdown, Diaz is confident that both countries can work and have bright futures together.

"Malaysia will recover and take Cuba along with it. Even now, while facing the economic crisis, Malaysia is much better off than Cuba because we are not only facing an internal economic problem but also an economic war with US-imposed sanctions.

"We have a small population, about 11 million, but we have the spirit to work hard and improve our condition in addition to trying to maintain our political and economic independence," she said, adding that the tourism industry was the major income earner for the country, growing at the rate of 20 per cent annually.

Brushing aside differences in ideology and a possible backlash from certain quarters, Dr Mahathir said that Malaysia "is prepared to take the risk" of forging trade ties with Cuba as the country had great potential for growth and Malaysia wanted to participate in its economic evolution.

Diaz said that she was proud that Malaysia had chosen Cuba as its new trade and investment partner in the Latin American region.

Bilateral trade between Malaysia and Cuba was still small because of the focus on very few products. In 1996, trade reached US\$612,000 (US\$1 = RM3.80), nearly 30 per cent lower than 1995.

"It is actually difficult to determine the bilateral trade statistics as most trades are made via third parties.

"But last month, the Cubans received the first palm oil shipment from Malaysia which amounted to some US\$10 million," she said.

The bulk of Cuba's exports to Malaysia is made up of industrial alcohol, while imports from Malaysia comprised mainly sound and telecommunication equipment and air conditioners.

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