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Reasons why Malaysia will overcome, prosper

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THE financial problems affecting Asia since last summer and their repercussions on Malaysia made me reflect on our recent stay in Kuala Lumpur.

We made Kuala Lumpur our home for almost three years and enjoyed our time in Malaysia. We returned to Canada with many good memories and very positive feelings about Malaysia and its peoples.

We moved to Kuala Lumpur in late 1994. As we drove from the airport to Shangri-la hotel we were impressed with the city's striking landscape, with its beautiful architecture and wide open green spaces. Those positive impressions never diminished.

We were struck by the vitality, charm and hospitality of the diverse and dynamic peoples who make Kuala Lumpur such a friendly and exciting place.

We found Malaysians of all races to have a refined gentility which makes them so very likeable.

The festive spirit surrounding our first Christmas in Kuala Lumpur was an experience we shall never forget.

As Christians, this made us feel respected and at home. We shall long remember the singing of Christmas carols and decorations around shopping malls and hotels, including a "Merry Christmas" sign at the local airport.

Soon thereafter, we enjoyed the festivities of Chinese New Year, Hari Raya and Deepavali.

What a civilised and generous way of making peoples of diverse religions feel respected and happy. Everybody becomes enriched and stronger by knowing and respecting other people's beliefs and customs.

We wondered whether there is a non-Muslim country where its small Muslim minority can experience similar feelings.

Venice was once such a place. At the height of its prosperity and power, Venice was wise enough to recognise the contributions of its diverse minorities who brought with them a wealth of knowledge and customs. This included Muslims from the Arab world.

It is sad fact that the decline of Venice coincided with the end of that religious tolerance.

As our stay extended we began to understand Malaysia better and the reasons for its impressive achievements and potential.

We were impressed with the vibrancy of the native population that has rediscovered confidence through substantial accomplishments in social and economic development.

This confidence is contagious and one of the main reasons for the dynamism and promising future of the country.

It was only to be expected that the kind of economic success you had enjoyed over the recent past could not last forever, but that does not alter the fact that you are well ahead of where you were two decades ago.

Every economy is subject to cyclical growth which means that neither the good times nor the difficult times last forever.

Do not allow the present economic setbacks to dampen your sense of accomplishment and confidence, which together with the social cohesiveness and religious tolerance are the source of your achievements, and will be decisive in dealing with the present difficulties.

Much credit for this self-confidence and social cohesiveness must be given to the Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

This may turn out to be the greatest accomplishment of his leadership. Malaysia has a lot going for it. I for one would rather put my money with Dr Mahathir than with financial speculators. His efforts are directed towards improving the well-being of many.

The speculators regardless of whether they are local or foreign are only interested in advancing their selfish interest at the expense of others. Beware of the financial sector being master, rather than more appropriately a servant to its customers, including industry and trade.

Nothing good will come out if the financial sector is left unchecked. Yet, it is important that the financial sector be strong and independent. It takes real statesmanship to achieve the proper balance.

Take heart. Hard times will of necessity continue until other economies in this increasingly interdependent world make their own difficult adjustments.

Helen and I are now back in our home in Canada.

We believe in your ability to overcome your difficulties and my wife and I wish you well.