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## Local businessmen urged to set up joint ventures

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COLOMBIA has invited Malaysian businessmen and entrepreneurs to establish joint ventures, particularly in developing its oil palm plantation sector.

Its Foreign Minister Dr Maria Emma Mejia Velez said officials from the Primary Industries Ministry and other relevant agencies as well as businessmen are invited to visit Colombia to study the possibility of setting up such joint ventures.

The offer was conveyed by Velez during her meeting with Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

"Dr Lim says that he is sending a delegation to Colombia in March and we will develop a study to see how we can propose a joint-venture or expand our plantations similar to the Felda scheme," she told reporters at a joint press conference with Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Velez, who arrived last Saturday for a four-day visit to Malaysia, said Colombia has set a target to expand its oil palm plantation sector from the present 140,000ha to 200,000ha within five years.

"We hope to produce about one million tonnes of palm oil in the next five years from the present 500,000 tonnes by expanding the plantations.

"We also hope this will be done using Malaysian technologies and expertise," she said, adding that the Colombian Government is currently looking into the possibility of converting illegal coca plantations into oil palm estates.

She noted that the Colombian Government had managed to demolish some 43,000ha of coca plantations and converted the land into a more productive use such as oil palm plantations.

Noting Colombia's confidence over Malaysia's economic performance despite the present economic problems in the country, Velez said steps are being taken to increase bilateral trade between both countries.

"We will continue to expand our bilateral trade with Malaysia which now stands at US\$39 million (US\$1 = RM4.57)," she said. Colombian exports are mainly pesticides, steel and machineries, while it imports computers and parts as well as palm oil from Malaysia.

Asked whether Colombia is willing to use currencies of the respective countries they are trading with, Velez said it is in no position to agree or disagree with Malaysia's proposal.

"I know your Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) spoke on that idea. I don't know whether it is good to trade in each other's currencies ... that is a difficult idea," she said, adding that she may discuss this during her meeting with the Prime Minister.

However, she said more importantly, there is a need for Colombia and Malaysia to strengthen their roles to take care of the short-term capital, namely the respective currency and stock markets.

Meanwhile, National Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia vice president Datuk V.K.K. Teagarajan said Colombian businessmen have voiced their interest in taking part in the privatization projects and infrastructure improvements in Malaysia.

These are areas in which Malaysia has relatively good expertise. "They may be able to tap our expertise for their own country," he told reporters after meeting Velez.

Teagarajan said Colombian businessmen are also very enthusiastic over Malaysia's large oil palm plantations but he advised them to study these

plantations first before they set up theirs.  
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