

28 JUN 1999

Mohale-Malaysia

EXCELLENT RELATIONSHIP WITH MALAYSIA WILL PREVAIL- SAFRICA ENVOY

By: Arul Rajoo

KUALA LUMPUR, June 28 (Bernama) -- South Africa's excellent relationship with Malaysia will continue despite the change in the country's leadership, its outgoing High Commissioner to Malaysia, Maite Emily Mohale said today.

She said Thabo Mbeki who succeeded South Africa's first black president Nelson Mandela last week, had emphasised his preference for continuity instead of overhauling the government's domestic and foreign policies.

"Both Mandela and Mbeki belong to the ANC (African National Congress). There's no Mandela policy or Mbeki policy but it's ANC policy," Mohale said in an interview here today as she ends her four-year stint in Malaysia tomorrow.

She was also accredited as South Africa's non-resident ambassador to the Philippines and Brunei during her stay here.

While acknowledging that the excellent bilateral ties were largely due to the close relationship between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Mandela, Mohale said she was confident it would continue to grow under Mbeki's leadership.

The close relationship was evident when Dr Mahathir was among the first foreign dignitaries to visit Mandela after the latter was released from prison in 1990, 27 years after being sent to jail for his fight against apartheid rule in his country.

She said Mbeki, who visited Malaysia during the Commonwealth Games last year in his capacity as deputy president then, had met Dr Mahathir then and also on several previous occasions and had reconfirmed the continuity of the special ties between both countries and their leaders.

Mohale said the close ties between both Malaysia and South Africa was evident in the frequent exchange of visits by Mandela and Dr Mahathir as well as by almost all the senior ministers from each country.

She said the relationship reached its best during her tenure as the country's first High Commissioner here after apartheid.

"Our ties goes back to the days of Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and ANC leaders such as Chief Albert Luthuli and Oliver Tambo. So I came here to formalise the relationship and not normalise it," said the mother of four children.

The close relationship between the two countries had opened up business opportunities with Malaysia now being the third biggest foreign direct investor in South Africa after the United States and Britain, with investment of RM4.5 billion.

Mohale said trade between the two countris had reached the RM2 billion mark but four times in favour of Malaysia.

Ways were being found to reduce the gap, she added.

She said the South African business community was encouraged to look for opportunities here.

Consulars had been appointed in Pulau Pinang and Sarawak for that purpose, she said.

To enhance business cooperation, the first Malaysia-South Africa Business Forum took place in Sun City during Dr Mahathir's visit there in 1995 while the second was held here when Mandela visited KL two years later.

Mohale said the economic slowdown in the region had to a certain extent affected Malaysia's investment in her country but large corporations like

Petronas, Telekom Malaysia and Country Heights still maintain their presence.

Petronas completed the acquisition of an entire equity interest in Engen Ltd of South Africa for US\$890 million last year, Country Heights developed the Pecanwood resort near Johannesburg while Malaysian businessman Datuk Samsudin Abu Hassan was one of the biggest individual investors there.

Mohale said one of the areas that South Africa was turning to for Malaysia's expertise was in its privatisation programmes and invited companies here to take part in sectors like forestry, energy and transportation.

"South Africa registered a two percent growth in the first quarter of the year. This is something we didn't dream a year ago...this adds confidence to the new government," she said.

Besides that, she said Malaysia's successful effort to raise the standard of living of its Bumiputras under the National Economic Policy had caught the eyes of her government.

"Malaysia's privatisation programmes had brought out people who are not in the mainstream of the economy. We are planning a programme similar to ASN (Amanah Saham Nasional) for the Black community and it will be launched soon," she said.

She said as the relationship in the past had over-emphasised on business, they are now looking at different areas like education, science and technology, cultural and tourism sectors as well as exchange of expertise in sports.

At the moment, South African students were at the Universiti Telekom and the International Islamic University.

"We can complement each other. We are a bit advanced in technology and can offer transfer of technology," she said.

Mohale said another potential area in strengthening the relationship was in culture and tourism.

Malaysia Airlines flies four times a week to Johannesburg and Cape Town and this could be further exploited and improved, she added.

"At present Malaysians go where MAS flies but they are looking at other places too now. Our tourists, on the other hand, are impressed with Langkawi, Melaka, Penang and Sarawak," she said.

South Africa's world class players in rugby and cricket, Mohale said were willing to help Malaysia while at the same time her country was looking for assistance to develop badminton and hockey.

Mohale said she was sad to leave Malaysia after such a memorable four-year stay in the country.

"My children and I are going to miss the friendly Malaysian people, the food and the different cultural activities. We will definitely miss the Indian food as well as the Malay beef rendang and nasi goreng as well as the Chinese fried rice and steamed fish," she said.

Mohale, who had been to all the states in Malaysia except Perlis, said one of her regrets was not being able to visit Sarawak's Mulu Caves and hoped to come back to fulfil her wish.

Mohale, one of the 20 South African women heads of diplomatic missions, said she was likely to be posted to another Asian country.

During her tenure, Mohale said every Malaysian government agency had given its fullest cooperation and made her job easier.

"I was very fortunate...I came to the right country at the right time and Malaysia will remain in my mind for a long time. It was splendid..." she said.

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