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## Gateway to Latin America

Nicholas Moreno

WHEN I was appointed the ambassador to Malaysia in January 1995, I took up the task with great commitment and anticipation. The challenge of becoming the first Uruguayan diplomat to set foot in this country - and the region - was in fact something which I had looked forward to.

So much has been achieved ever since. Relations between our two countries have improved tremendously to the extent that many Uruguayans and Malaysians have found a home in each other's land.

I am no exception. After being here for almost five years, and with my term coming to an end, the thought of leaving Malaysia is unbearable.

There is too much to treasure - good friends, a good life, and of course, all those fond memories about this country.

Ever since our two nations established diplomatic ties in 1987, and the setting up of the Uruguay Embassy in Kuala Lumpur in December 1994, relations have been at its best.

Malaysia is perhaps one of the best countries I have ever been to. The Government is benevolent, and so are its people.

Many Uruguayans learnt about Malaysia through its success - economically, socially and politically. And I am most fortunate to be given the chance to serve my country here, right in the place where many diplomats had wanted to be.

Malaysia's ebullient society is attributable to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is the right vision of a statesman. His flair in managing the country's economy under various circumstances is the envy of many developing nations.

Uruguay has seen how Dr Mahathir made inroads into the Latin American continent by means of his South-South approach. Ever since our two countries established diplomatic ties in 1987, Dr Mahathir has paved the way to cement better ties, not only with Uruguay but also with other Latin American countries.

The visits to Uruguay by the then Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Jaafar in September 1995, followed by Dr Mahathir's visit two months later were the breakthrough in our bilateral ties. Minister of International Trade and Industry Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz has also played an instrumental role in promoting our bilateral trades.

And I do believe that many Malaysians still remember the visit by President Dr Julio Maria Sanguinetti to Kuala Lumpur in July 1996 which opened more doors to our partnership.

Apart from the signing of various cooperation agreements, both countries are also engaged in bringing closer the developing groups of Asean and Mercusor to work more cohesively.

The Mercusor grouping, with a combined gross domestic product of US\$1.2 million (US\$1 = RM3.80) has huge potential for investors. Benefits became greater when Mercusor signed a framework agreement with the European Union to set up a free trade zone between the two regions.

Apart from building regional economic cooperation, Malaysia and Uruguay have seen trade relations expanding. Although the volume is still small, I believe much more can be done to enhance it.

Uruguay which is rapidly developing, invites Malaysian companies to participate in its many projects, including housing, tourism and other industries.

We see Malaysia as an important partner. Malaysia's economic achievement

has been looked upon as a model for the developing world. No doubt that the economic downturn in Asia has very much affected Malaysia and Uruguay, Dr Mahathir's Government has been quite prudent in steering Malaysia out of a prolonged economic complications.

Malaysian products are no strangers in Uruguay. And here, Uruguayan leather products and processed food are making it big. Malaysia Airlines has also introduced a service to Uruguay via South Africa.

Before the Embassy is established in late 1994, many Malaysians had known Uruguay by its name - its football supremacy, and perhaps the news about the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT).

However, our presence in this country has helped to give Malaysians a wider perception of our country, and on the converse has also helped the people in Uruguay to know more about this wonderful country.

It is in this aspect that Uruguay feels the need to bring our cooperation to a greater height.

I am glad that with the increasing rapport with South countries, Uruguay has figured highly as an option for Malaysian businessmen wishing to venture into Latin America.

Uruguay would like to see Malaysian exporters who are eyeing the Latin America market to make use of our infrastructure and facilities.

As a member of the Mercusor (which includes Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina), Uruguay has the advantage in trade with the rest of the Latin American countries.

Our two countries, situated in the two most dynamic economic regions of the world, could achieve more from our economic development. There are many areas such as trade, investment and tourism, where our two countries can benefit by cooperating and sharing each other's experiences, utilising each other's technological advantages as well as exchanging specialised skills.

While Uruguay's strategic location in the heart of Mercosur makes it an excellent gateway for Malaysia's participation in the enlarged regional market of Latin America, Malaysia is in the best position to act as the distribution centre for Uruguay's products in this region.

However, there is still potential for growth in our two-way trades as it is currently confined to a limited range of products comprising natural rubber and its products, sound recorders, radio-broadcast receivers and cars.

Potential areas of development, especially through joint ventures, include manufacturing activities like food processing, textiles, clothing and leather industries and construction is still abundant.

There is also potential for development in the tourism-related sector (hotels and shopping centres) and facilities like leisure boat wharfs.

I do hope that the people of the two countries would visit each other more often as this would bind them stronger. Efforts, too, must be taken to improve relations between the business community of our two nations.

As our two governments have paved the way for the business sector to cross-invest in Uruguay and Malaysia, it is necessary that they take it up with full commitment and responsibility.

After being here for almost five years, I find it hard to say goodbye. Living in Malaysia has taught me a lot about friendship and altruism - something that never comes easy these days.

We may be oceans apart but our hearts remain together. Let us pray to God that in the years to come, our spirit of fraternity will elevate to a new entente.

\* The writer is the Uruguayan Ambassador to Malaysia.

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