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## Rendezvous with France

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THE 14th of July was declared the French Republic's National Day in 1880. Originally, it was the day that signaled the start of the French Revolution, which began by the storming of the Bastille. This event marked the people's first victory against the symbol of the Ancient Regime.

The French Republic comprises metropolitan France, divided into 22 regions and subdivided into 96 departments, along with four overseas departments - Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane (French Guiana) and Reunion. It also includes four overseas territories - French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories - and two territorial collectivities with special status, Mayotte and St Pierre and Miquelon.

France is a democracy whose institutional basis is the Constitution of the 4th of October 1958. Jacques Chirac became President of the Republic on the 7th of May 1995 for a seven year term. Lionel Jospin has been appointed Prime Minister in June 1997.

The national anthem is the "Marseillaise", the motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" and the tricolour the official standard. The French Republic is a secular state where all the religious faiths and denominations are represented. The Catholics make up 81.4 per cent of the population, while Muslims are among the fastest growing communities at 6.89 per cent.

With an area of 550,000 sq km, France is the largest country in Western Europe. As of January 1 1998, France has 60.9 million inhabitants, making it the 21st most populated country in the world.

With a gross domestic product of Ffr8564.7 trillion or US\$1.33 trillion in 1998 (RM1 = Ffr1.69), France is the world's fourth largest economic power and the second largest market in the European Union. The country's assets are varied and include its transport and telecommunications sectors, agrifood stuffs and pharmaceutical industries, along with banking, insurance, tourism and the traditional luxury products.

In 1998, France had a trade surplus of US\$23.19 billion (22.71 billion euros or Ffr149 billion), making it the world's fourth largest exporter of goods and second in services and agriculture. It is the leading producer and exporter of farm products in Europe. It carries out 63 per cent of its trade with its EU partners.

France ranks fourth internationally for direct inward investment (Ffr165,366 billion in 1998 or US\$25.75 billion). Its economic performances reflect a wide range of strengths (low inflation, attractive interest rates, stable currency, competitiveness, outstanding transport infrastructure, leading-edge scientific and technical expertise, a productive workforce, etc) that have attracted 8,000 international businesses, as well as the commitment of Government and regional authorities to improving conditions for investors.

France has decided to develop and strengthen economic ties with countries in South East Asia. The countries in the region have not only performed well economically, they also have a more important political role.

Thus, France would also like to establish strong political relations with member states of the Association of South-East Asian Nations which have contributed and continues to contribute significantly to peace and stability in Asia.

This growing interest has been reinforced by President Chirac's passion for the Asian continent, which he expressed in a speech given in February 1996. Today the special relationship between President Chirac and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is indeed the driving force behind Franco-Malaysian relations.

A great deal has already been accomplished. Since 1996, the links between our two countries have quickly developed and have largely diversified. Between 1993 and 1997, the volume of bilateral trade has almost doubled. It stands today at more than RM9 billion. Thus, with exports to our country amounting to RM6 billion in 1998, France is the 4th biggest importer in Europe of Malaysian products, mainly electrical and electronics as well as fast moving consumer goods. The balance of trade is generally in Malaysia's favour and Malaysian exports have increased even more since the beginning of the economic and financial crisis.

There are more than 250 French companies represented in Malaysia, compared with 100 in 1990. They have expressed confidence in Malaysia's economic future. Therefore, trade, investments and partnerships could flourish in many fields where French expertise and savoir-faire are well known and meet Malaysian needs - production and distribution of water, electronics and telephone manufacturing, car, oil and gas, infrastructure development, defense and aerospace industries, agri-food industry and consumer goods distribution.

In many cases, partnerships between French and Malaysian companies include technology transfers which will support the continuity of Malaysia's economic growth. However, because of our late start, we have to intensify our efforts to strengthen this relationship.

In this respect, the Trade Commission of this Embassy will launch "Rendez-vous de France", a French festival in Malaysia between the 1st and the 17th October 1999. The first edition of this festival has a dual purpose: it should create awareness of French products and services, firstly among companies wishing to develop their business and secondly, among members of the public who expect a better understanding of what France has to offer in terms of consumer products, industrial equipment and high technology.

Apart from establishing a strong economic partnership between Malaysia and France, our efforts to strengthen the relationship between our two countries could also focus on two areas - the promotion of exchanges and cooperation in education and training as well as the pursuit of fruitful political dialogue amidst a background characterised by economic globalisation and regional conflicts.

Malaysian and French people understand each other better - many French citizens travel to Malaysia and many Malaysians (80,000) visit France each year. There are also 6,000 Malaysian students learning French in 53 different schools in Malaysia and we will do our best to increase these figures.

However, language should not be a barrier when it comes to improving cooperation in the field of education. As a matter of fact, programmes between universities, colleges and business schools of both countries have recently intensified, especially in the areas of information technology, business management, data processing and tourism.

This increased cooperation is a response to higher demand for further education in France from Malaysian students, especially at post-graduate level, and could easily be extended to other fields. It should be encouraged in the future and lead to common research studies.

On the international scene, Malaysia and France share a close way of thinking. This common approach led the two leaders to have similar views

on a wide range of issues. Therefore, the cooperation between our two governments is especially productive.

In the field of the international financial architecture, both leaders have called for urgent reforms and have proposed their own formulas. Among the G-7 countries, France is also a strong advocate of ideas promoted by emerging countries and wishes to associate them to the revamping of the international monetary system.

Since Malaysia has been a member of the United Nations Security Council from January 1 1999, cooperation between France and Malaysia, who often share the same views, have been constant and useful when managing regional conflicts, such as Iraq and Kosovo.

Malaysia, Japan and France have also embarked on a trilateral cooperation to contribute to the economic and social development of Africa. Earlier this year, the first action was implemented in the field of vocational training. Other projects are being prepared in various fields (agriculture, forestry, training, etc).

France will continue to participate actively to ensure the success of these exemplary actions, which associate three complementary expertises in Africa.

In all these fields, France will continue to be actively involved in the improvement of the bilateral concertations conducted so far. This should continue because Malaysian support for ideas that France promotes within the international institutions is important for the achievement of our common goals.

As France's ambassador to Malaysia, I would like to acknowledge the efforts made by those involved in this special relationship. I not only wish them the best for the future but my staff and I would also like them to know that they have our full support, because I am aware that there is still a lot more that needs to be done to reinforce bilateral relations between our two countries.

With this message of hope for our future relations, I would also like to add my sincere wishes of happiness and prosperity to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong His Majesty Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, to the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, members of the Government and the Malaysian people.