

05/06/1999

So far apart and yet so close

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THE distance between Malaysia and Sweden is more than ten thousand kilometres. The northern part of Sweden is situated above the Arctic circle while Malaysia almost touches on the Equator. The time difference is six hours.

Despite the geographical distance, the relations between our two countries are excellent in every way - and they have been so, for as long as anyone can remember.

Who can be recognised for this achievement and what is it that constitutes the foundation for our close relationship?

Of course our two governments have increased the bilateral ties during the 1990s. In 1994, the Swedish Prime Minister visited Malaysia and two years later, in 1996, Their Majesties King Carl Gustav and Queen Silvia came to Malaysia on a state visit.

The Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad visited Sweden briefly in May 1998.

As a member of the European Union (EU), Sweden has also been given additional channels to enhance our relations, for example within the EU-Asean cooperation and the Asia-European Meeting (Asem).

But while I truly value and recognise the importance of strong official ties, I believe the image of Sweden in Malaysia is not created and generated by official initiatives and campaigns but by a number of disparate and uncoordinated impressions.

For instance, the names Bjorn Borg, Stefan Edberg, Jesper Parnevik and Annika Sorenstam generate a natural and positive association with Sweden. As does the mentioning of pop groups like ABBA, Roxette, Ace of Base, Robyn and Eagle-Eye Cherry - and perhaps in some places, the name of the Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman.

The Nobel Prize is another Swedish phenomena that has given a country of only 9 million inhabitants worldwide attention.

The same positive effect can be noted when you mention company names such as Volvo, SAAB, Scania, Ericsson, SKF, Electrolux, ABB, Ikea, Aotuliv, Celcius, Swedish Match and so forth.

Together with sports and music, there is nothing in today's globalised society which is as effective as trade to generate positive associations and to promote cooperation and good relations between nations.

Being an export-oriented economy, Sweden knows that increased cooperation and trade can only be achieved by long-term commitment.

We attach great importance to Malaysia's success and its vision of becoming a fully developed and industrialised country by the year 2020. I would like to believe that Sweden can play a role in Malaysia's pursuit of the Vision 2020.

It has been reassuring to see that my country's commitment to Malaysia never waned during the Asia economic crisis. On the contrary.

Small and medium-sized companies as well as more established Swedish firms have been successful in earning the prestigious Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) status. In 1999, we also notice an ever increasing optimism from Swedish companies investing in Malaysia.

With more and more indicators showing that Malaysia's economy has bottomed out, Swedish long-time investors can expect to be amply rewarded. This spring, the Swedish Government has presented a strategy for Asia, "Our Future With Asia".

The strategy aims at presenting an integrated Swedish strategy for the countries of Asia and includes political relations, security policy, trade, economic cooperation, development cooperation, environmental cooperation, research, information and culture.

The Swedish-Malaysian Scholarship Fund has been sponsoring a number of Malaysian students going to Sweden. The students are attending courses in information technology, engineering and social studies at the renowned universities of Stockholm, Gothenburg, Uppsala, Linkoping and Lund. Concurrently, more and more Swedes are coming to Malaysia as tourists. Being a nature-loving people, Swedes know how to appreciate Malaysia's 200 million years old untouched rainforests of Borneo and the beautiful beaches and waters of the islands of Langkawi, Redang, Perhentian and Tioman.

The buzzing capital Kuala Lumpur is home to the tallest building in the world (now famous worldwide in the movie The Entrapment) and offers not only a rich cultural variety but also affordable shopping and dining. Malaysia is showing the world what it is capable of. In October, one billion people all over the world will be watching live the coverage of the Formula One from the Sepang Circuit.

Swedes will enjoy watching the Swedish golfers at the Mines Resort in the World Cup Golf. Perhaps they will read about the result on the Internet on a high-technology computer "Made in Malaysia".

I invite you to take part of and enjoy Sweden just as I invite Swedes to take part of and enjoy Malaysia. When you think about it, we have a lot in common and to gain from an enhanced cooperation.