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Stronger ties with Kazakhstan in offing

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DESPITE the decrease in the volume of trade between Malaysia and Kazakhstan in the first six months of last year, the two countries are set to strengthen bilateral relations, according to the republic's ambassador to Malaysia, Mr Amankeldi Zhumabayev.

"For the past six months of 1998, trade volume reached only US\$2 million (RM3.80 = US\$1) due to the economic problem ... but we are confident it can be increased soon," he told Business Times yesterday.

Trade between the two countries doubled from US\$12.9 million in 1996 to US\$24.7 million in 1997.

Zhumabayev said efforts have been taken to increase trade this year, such as improving transport links between the countries and signing several memorandums of understanding.

As Kazakhstan is a landlocked country, it is accessible only via air and railway from Russia, the Persian Gulf and China.

Malaysia and Kazakhstan have so far signed a trade and investment agreement, a bilateral payments agreement, an investment guarantee agreement and an air services agreement.

"The next agreement on the avoidance of double taxation is ready for signing," he said.

Malaysia and Kazakhstan established diplomatic relations in July 1996, following Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Almaty. Since then, both countries have signed bilateral agreements on economic, scientific and technical cooperation, promotion and protection of investment and trade, and air services.

Yesterday was election day for the citizens of Kazakhstan as they voted in the presidential polls. Those currently staying in Malaysia voted at its embassy in Kuala Lumpur.

Four candidates are running for the presidency, incumbent President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Communist Party leader Serikbolsyn Abdildin, the Senate of the Parliament member Engels Gabbassov and Customs Committee chairman Gani Kassymov.

"About 70 people are expected to turn up for the elections, including those from Kazakhstan's consulates in Thailand and Australia," Zhumabayev said of the voting in its embassy.

By 12 noon yesterday, more than 50 people had turned up to vote.

Kazakhstan's embassy in Kuala Lumpur was established in February 1997, and is its only one in South-East Asia. Kazakhstan is the second country, after Russia, from the former Soviet Union to establish an embassy in Kuala Lumpur.

Kazakhstan has a multi-racial population of about 17 million, made up of 131 ethnic groups, including Kazakhs, Germans, Russians, Azerbaijanis and Koreans. Kazakhs and Russians form the biggest groups with 52 and 30 per cent respectively.

"About eight million people who are 18 years old and above are eligible to vote," said Zhumabayev.

The results of the elections will be known in 10 days because Kazakhstan is a big country and it takes some time to gather the votes from polling stations which are situated at various places.

The former Soviet Union state, which is abundant with oil, gas and minerals, obtained its sovereignty in December 1991, following the disbandment of the Union. It is the ninth biggest country in the world.

"The majority of the population are Muslims, while the rest are Christians and Buddhists," said embassy attache Zhanna Sartbayeva.
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