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Australia seeks to strengthen relations

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AUSTRALIA would like to see its bilateral relations with Malaysia improve further as both countries are now engaged in the same set of "millennium challenges".

"We now look at Malaysia and the region as one of the most promising areas for economic, political and social cooperation. Economic relations with Malaysia, for instance, has always been important and rewarding.

"Australia and Malaysia have been partners in various areas. Despite some minor differences, the cooperation at government-to-government, people-to-people and business-to-business levels have been very good.

"We just cannot deny the fact that we need each other, especially in confronting the challenges (of the new millennium)," its new High Commissioner to Malaysia Peter N. Varghese said.

Canberra and Kuala Lumpur, he said, can look forward to working closely in several globally-revolving issues such as the new architecture of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

Australia, according to Varghese, has always been supportive of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call for a revamp in the international monetary system.

"We, too, have voiced concerns over the irregularities of the international financial system and the need to amend its structure and management.

"Australia and Malaysia - despite disagreement in some petty issues - are always good partners when it comes to serious global obligation. This is where our partnership gets so special," he said.

Australia is also an active participant to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum, the Commonwealth and an important dialogue partner of the Asean Regional Forum.

Varghese also said that economic relations between Australia and Malaysia has seen a tremendous improvement over the past few years.

"None of the 200 Aussie companies had left Malaysia during the economic downturn (in July 1997) and none had resorted to retrenching their workers. We believe in long-term partnership... they (the companies) are here to stay.

"In fact, our bilateral trade has doubled over the last two years. More Australian companies are coming to Malaysia and some Malaysian business entities - about 150 of them - have invested heavily in Australia," he said.

Since 1998, Malaysian exports to Australia have grown at an average rate of 23 per cent per annum and Malaysia enjoyed a trade surplus of about RM2.4 billion with Australia.

This, according to the High Commissioner, is a direct result of the openness and the ease of access to Australia's market and Malaysia's competitive exchange rate as well as its well targeted products.

Australia, too, hosts the largest number of Malaysian students, which stands at 16,000 this year.

"Education is the area which binds us together. The opening of the new branch campus of Curtin University at Miri and the first branch campus of Monash University (at Bandar Sunway) will further enhance such cooperation."

Australia's economy, he said, also depends on its economic relations with Malaysia and other Asian trading partners.

In its latest economic survey released in December, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) gives a very favourable assessment of the Australian economy.

The country, according to the survey, has exceeded most expectations with real gross domestic product (GDP) growth substantially above its trend rate for the past 30 years.

Canberra's economic policies were lauded as "judicious mix of sound macroeconomic and structural policies, which inter alia had brought inflation under control, reduced public sector borrowing and generated an acceleration of productivity growth".

Varghese, in expressing hopes of further strengthening Australia-Malaysia relations during his tenure, also mentioned the importance of the media's role in enhancing such efforts.

"The Press of both sides should take up the complementary role in cementing our ties. We should put a halt to bias and exaggerating reports which in the past have had some negative impacts on our relations."

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