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East Timorese face a long walk to progress

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WHEN Indonesia made East Timor one of its own in 1975, the world did not pay too much attention.

Jose Alexandre Xanana Gusmao, like Yasser Arafat and Nur Misuari, began to lead the struggle for the former Portuguese colony's independence. Over the years, East Timor became Jakarta's diplomatic nightmare.

Last year's referendum, which saw the people in the territory voting overwhelmingly for independence, was the dream that Gusmao and his followers probably never thought would be realised in their lifetime.

Gusmao, who visited Malaysia this week, now lives with the reality that the dream-come-true is just the start of what will be a long walk to progress for his nation and people. East Timor is decades behind in terms of development compared with the rest of the region, even after taking into account the impact of the two-year regional financial crisis, and it does not have the necessary economic tools to develop.

Malaysia, on the other hand, has gained independence for 42 years. At the same time East Timorese were intensifying their struggle for their independence, Malaysians were fighting their own battle to defend its independence against the old colonial masters who are now armed with new economic weapons.

But Malaysia has also been accused of not supporting East Timor in their struggle for independence, of being against the referendum, and of not wanting to recognise the wishes of the East Timorese to be divorced from Indonesia.

Gusmao's visit to Malaysia shall have put to rest those suspicions and allegations.

As Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar puts it: "When East Timor was part of Indonesia, it was our policy not to interfere in internal affairs. But after the consultative process, Malaysia has always been supportive."

Gusmao's visit to Malaysia, accompanied by compatriot and Nobel Peace Prize winner Jose Ramos-Horta, has opened the door for greater understanding not only between Malaysia and East Timor but also for those outsiders who did not understand the Asean process and therefore had thought that Malaysia was an enemy of East Timor.

Why would Gusmao want to step foot in Malaysia if there is no hope or help here?

The answer is that the East Timorese leader knows Malaysia better than the commentators of those good-selling A4-size international magazines. Gusmao and delegation have come to the right place. Malaysia, after all, has a lot of experience, having extended both material and moral support to the oppressed and Independence-seekers in Palestine, Mindanao, Bosnia, Somali, Chechnya, and South Africa.

The East Timorese need support and assistance from their neighbours, not only in the form of material help but also support to form political and social institutions and its government. They are now in a period of emergency in which they lack everything - houses, food and health care.

East Timor can rest assured that Malaysia will go out of its way to be of help. But the others in the international community, particularly those who had obtained some of their past wealth by conquering countries and forming colonies, should do more.

The World Bank has estimated that rebuilding East Timor and its

shattered economy will likely cost up to US\$300 million (US\$1 = RM3.80) over the next three years. East Timor's main crop is coffee and it exported US\$20 million annually in beans under Indonesian rule.

They have to rebuild every school and equip it, they have to rebuild every hospital and equip it. "But we know that with the same courage and determination and with the same injection of solidarity, love and help from other countries in the world, we will win again," Gusmao said.

Gusmao and Ramos-Horta have asked Malaysia - after meetings with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Syed Hamid - to provide aid and Kuala Lumpur has asked for an itemised list of their needs.

One of the toughest tasks is for East Timor to promote democracy, pluralism and human rights along with material growth. Analysts, however, said that desperately-needed jobs should be provided more quickly for East Timorese after talks between the UN administration in Dili and the World Bank.

According to the World Bank, the normal 12- to 18-month period required for disbursement of World Bank funds for labour-intensive projects had already been shortened to only a few months.

Gusmao had last month called on donors to quickly disburse funds to help address the emerging frustration of East Timorese who see little progress in the reconstruction of their territory.

As neighbours, Malaysia is not only compelled to extend necessary assistance to the East Timorese but also keeping close cooperation with the Indonesian authority. In fact, such responsibilities do not involve one country alone.

Indonesia, which granted the independence, and the rest of Asean member countries, should start working cohesively to lend their hands in redeveloping East Timor. History aside, Indonesia could pave the way by spearheading such efforts.

The important thing today is that Asean - and the international community - no longer treat East Timor leaders as "unwelcomed lots". Instead, Malaysia and Asean looked set for warm relations in the years ahead.

"We want to forge ahead towards regional and bilateral relations and we believe the East Timor government will be in place within two or three years," said Syed Hamid.

Dr Mahathir himself offered East Timor expertise in gas and petroleum production and help in training a civil service. Malaysia is also willing to explore investment opportunities.

Apart from these, the leaders sought help such as university places for technical training, training of diplomatic staff and the provision of doctors.

And they even asked for Malaysia's support for them to participate in the Asean process. Although Ramos-Horta has previously been sharply critical of Asean, his perception has changed after the referendum.

There is vast opportunity for foreign investors like Malaysia in East Timor. Portugal's top coffee producer is already buying into the sector in the territory.

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