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Strong Malaysia-Yemen ties which date back to the 15th Century

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THE Republic of Yemen was born on May 22 1990, after decades of separation between the North and South due to the colonisation of the Southern part and later to the Cold War. On that day His Excellency Ali Abdullah Saleh raised the flag of the new Republic blessed by the full support of the entire Yemeni people.

The relationship between Yemen and Malaysia dates back to the 15th Century. Historians of the Malay culture and civilization have always acknowledged the crucial role played by the Yemeni merchants, Ulama and Muftis - especially from Hadramout - in the Islamisation process which started among the Rajas and the high strata of the Malays, converting the Malay people into Islam.

Today, Islam has become a symbol of identity for the Malay society.

However, in January 1998 the two countries took a solid step towards strengthening their relations, with Yemen establishing a resident mission in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia reciprocated in September last year by establishing its Diplomatic Mission in Sana'a.

The official visit of His Excellency Ali Abdullah Saleh, the President of the Republic of Yemen, to Malaysia was an important milestone in our bilateral relationship, and it took place from February 11 to 14 1998, upon an invitation from the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong and the Government of Malaysia.

During his visit, he held official talks with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. During the talks, they underlined the unique character of our bilateral relations, which are based upon a common history, sanguineous ties and culture, as well through the boosting of an economic and trade partnership.

The presidential visit culminated with the signing of four important agreements. The Economic, Scientific, Technical and Cultural Cooperation Agreement which laid the foundations for the establishment of an Inter-Government Joint Committee, the Trade Incentive Agreement; the Investment Guarantees Agreement and a Memorandum of Understanding between the Malaysian Authority for Industrial Development and the Yemen Investment Authority.

Economic and trade ties may be the milestones by which the future aspirations of our two countries are assessed, but we must never underestimate our cultural ties. As the Malaysian Prime Minister once mentioned, the people of Yemen were the first people from the West to come to Malaysia.

During the last two years of my work in Malaysia, I had the pleasure of being exposed to the many vivid facets of the Malaysian people and was pleasantly surprised by their keen interest in interacting with the people of Yemen.

Representatives of the Malaysian business community have visited Yemen as part of delegations and in separate groups in order to make their own assessment of the opportunities available in my country.

The Yemeni Embassy, in cooperation with Malaysian institutions such as Matrade, organised a seminar on "Doing Business with Yemen and the Investment Opportunities". Since the establishment of resident diplomatic missions in Kuala Lumpur and Sana'a, the number of official visits has grown.

Datuk Paduka Dr Abdul Hamid Othman, Minister in the Prime Minister

Department, visited Yemen in September 1998. Another important visit by a senior Malaysian minister was the visit made by Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Jaffar Albar, Foreign Minister of Malaysia. This event took place in April 1999. The minister was accompanied by a business delegation.

The official talks during the visit reflected the fact that our views on international and regional relations coincided in many important ways and revealed our willingness to further strengthen our cooperation within the framework of the Organisation of Islamic Conference and the United Nations as well as on a bilateral basis.

The economic outcome of the visit was also positive, with both parties having discussed the refining of Malaysian oil in the Aden Refinery, investments in the Aden Free Zone and infrastructure projects such as those involving power production.

In June 1999 His Excellency Sheikh Abdullah Alahmar, Speaker of the House of Representatives of Republic of Yemen, paid an official visit to Kuala Lumpur where he had an audience with the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong, and fruitful discussions with the Prime Minister and the Speaker of the Dewan Rakyat.

Another important step to strengthen the bilateral relation was the official visit of His Excellency Dr Yahya Mohamed Al-Shuaibi, the Minister of Education of Yemen to Malaysia, in March 2000, where he held fruitful talks with the Minister of Education, Tan Sri Musa Mohamad, that resulted in the signing of a cooperation agreement between the two ministries.

I would now like to spend little time giving you a political and economic perspective of Yemen.

Yemen is first and foremost, a democratic country. It has held three democratic elections during the last 10 years. Two Parliamentary elections were held in 1993 and in 1997 with the participation of all the political parties in the national arena.

These elections were conducted with total freedom as well as transparency and have been recognised by all the necessary international and regional monitors as well as observers.

Yemen had another democratic experience last year with its presidential elections. It was the first time in Yemen history that the President of the Republic was elected through a direct popular vote. It was another step in Yemeni democracy and His Excellency Ali Abdullah Saleh got the popular support with a majority of 96 per cent in September 1999.

For its crucial role in the implementation of democratic structures, Yemen has been given the honour of hosting the International Summit of Newly Established Democracies, which was held in Sana'a last year and was attended by leaders and delegates from newly democratic countries and UN High Commission for Human Rights.

In the economic arena, the Government of Yemen has reiterated its unflinching commitment to economic, administrative, judicial and industrial reforms in order to create the most conducive climate for foreign direct investment.

In line with these objectives, the project to convert the city of Aden into a Free Trade Zone is becoming a reality with the culmination of the first phase. In fact the container terminal in Aden was inaugurated last year and has received an encouraging numbers of ships.

The country's laws provide sufficient guarantees to foreign investors seeking to undertake projects either unilaterally or through joint ventures with local investors. The laws also guarantee the free and smooth transfer of capital and all profits in any convertible currency.

Finally, I would like to thank Business Times and the Malaysian media for their interest in Yemen, its people, business, culture and politics. I think the press can contribute highly in bringing our two countries and

their peoples together.

\* The writer is the Ambassador of Yemen to Malaysia.  
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