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Cuba-Embargo

CUBA OPTIMISTIC US EMBARGO WILL BE LIFTED

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 20 (Bernama) -- Cuba is confident that the 39-year-old trade embargo imposed by the United States against that country will end "at one point in time" but not under the administration of President George W. Bush.

"It is a matter of time, time is on our side. At one point in time, the blockade will disappear," Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said today.

Speaking to Bernama through an interpreter in an interview, here, Roque, who is on a three-day official visit to Malaysia, said he was not optimistic that the Bush administration would change the American policy towards Cuba.

"It (the Bush administration) is not going to lift the blockade.

"However, within the US Congress, some decisions could be made in order to favour the lifting of the blockade. But I do not think that the administration of President Bush himself will take the initiative," he said.

The US embargo was imposed in 1962 by President John F. Kennedy, shortly after the takeover of the Cuban government by Fidel Castro.

The embargo was tightened twice, in 1992 and 1996.

He said Cuba's biotechnological and pharmaceutical products were of high quality and will meet the requirements of the Malaysian market.

"The public health sector is highly developed in Cuba. Our products are proven to be of high quality and is competitively priced," he said.

Cuba produces vaccines, among others, for Hepatitis B and Meningitis and is currently developing other vaccines and products for cancer, which Roque said can be exported to Malaysia in a bid to increase bilateral trade.

He also said tourism, which is the most dynamic branch of the Cuban economy, also offered tremendous potential to be explored.

According to him, some two million tourist arrivals are expected this year and there is a need to build and manage more hotels in Cuba.

Asked if Cuba plans to open a trade centre in Kuala Lumpur, Roque said, "We are only just beginning."

He said trade between Cuba and Malaysia is very small with Cuba importing palm oil and other products.

Companies from Cuba and Malaysia should acquire knowledge about the market and opportunities available in both countries.

"I believe this should be an on-going process which should be developed," he said.

Roque said despite the difficulty, especially with the United States trade embargo still in place since 1962, the Cuban economy has been recovering and new prospects are emerging.

Asked if Malaysia could use Cuba as a gateway to the Caribbean region, Roque said Cuba was ideal for this purpose given its geographical location and excellent ties with Carricom (the Caribbean community) which is made up of 15 countries and a population of 50 million.

He said Malaysian companies can also benefit from Cuba's economic cooperation agreements with Carricom nations.

The Carricom community has greatly reduced tariffs in order to favour trade between Caribbean countries and Cuba.

Besides, Cuba has several free trade zones with 53 airlines flying to

Cuba and international maritime routes connect Cuba with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

"With infrastructure such as international airports and ports, highly qualified labour and 600,000 university graduates, Cuba is without doubt a country which can provide the gateway for Malaysian companies to the Caribbean region," he added.

Cuba and Malaysia established diplomatic ties in 1975.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made an official trip to Cuba in 1997 and attended the Group of 77's South Summit in Havana last year.

The two countries signed agreements on trade and the exemption of visas in 1994.

In 1997, the central banks of Cuba and Malaysia signed Letters of Understanding on credit and payment.

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