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Gordon to boost ties with Malaysia

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"YOU are back," was the first words of greeting uttered by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he met with the new Philippines Tourism Secretary Richard Gordon during the opening ceremony of the PATA conference at PWTC on Sunday.

Gordon who has been credited with turning the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority (SBMA), an ex-US naval base and "sin city", into a thriving freeport with expanded infrastructure sprinkled with new industries, was appointed by president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo as Tourism Secretary after she assumed the presidency from Joseph Estrada this January.

Gordon made media headlines in July 1999 when he barricaded himself inside the Subic Bay industrial enclave after being removed as chairman of the SBMA by Estrada.

He defied a government decision to give up his post to former congressman Felicito Payumo, an Estrada ally but later relented when many of his supporters were injured when Estrada sent 500 policemen to storm the administrative office to evict Gordon.

Asked to comment on his discussions with Dr Mahathir, Gordon said one of the first subject both of them brought up was the need for leaders not to get involved in the domestic affairs of another country.

"Estrada broke the Asean code (of non-intervention) by openly supporting deposed former deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and also criticising the court action against him.

"It is imperative for countries in this region to enjoy peace, harmony and prosperity, they should adhere to the code of non-intervention. Leaders should not be meddling in each other's affairs as this would only jeopardise the good relations countries in this region have been enjoying over the years," he said in an interview with the New Straits Times.

He said Arroyo is currently doing a good job to put the country back on a strong footing and have instituted several measures to prop up the economy and bring foreign investments.

He said Dr Mahathir and Arroyo have been in close contact and have had discussions on the possibility of increasing investments between the two countries especially in the Information Technology and tourism sector.

"There is a need to speed this up as it would mean opening up more job opportunities and both nations also need to work together to market our tourist sites so that we can enjoy more foreign exchange," he said.

He said 70 percent of Philippines' exports head for the United States and with the slowing down of the North American nation's economy, Manila has to quickly look for new markets and implement measures so that the Filipino people's livelihoods are not affected too much.

He urged Malaysian businessmen to visit the Philippines and identify areas where they can invest so that both nations could enjoy symbiotic gains and added that many Malaysian investors in the past have found the Philippine investment climate conducive especially the various incentives offered and the easily trainable manpower that is available.

He said on a government to government level the relations and co-operation between the two countries can scale new heights since the leadership see eye-to-eye on many issues and there is firm commitment on both sides to have a meaningful relationship based on trust.

He said Malaysia under the leadership of Dr Mahathir has seen meteoric development and Malaysians have a lot to be proud of and hoped that

Philippines could take a leaf out of Kuala Lumpur chapter and see similar progress.

During his meeting with Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, they discussed the need to increase the number of flights between Kuala Lumpur and Manila and steps would be taken to implement this quickly.

He said the Philippines was more than happy to accommodate chartered flights to Subic Bay, Clark Airbase, Davao and other cities and negotiations on this subject is currently on-going.

"The people to people relations between our two countries can only go forward. We are linked by strong cultural and historical bonds and even our independence hero Jose Rizal, was a Malay.

"There is a need to strengthen these bonds and embark on programmes of mutual co-operation so the friendship that we have enjoyed for generations will continue to flourish," he added.

Asked to comment on his new job, he said, Arroyo had made the Tourism portfolio, a senior Cabinet position since she realised the benefit that could be derived from increased tourists flow.

"There is a deep sense of urgency just like the time I was heading the SBMA.

"My officials and I managed to come up with the right tonic to turn the Subic Bay area into a success story and now we are working round the clock to bring similar success to the tourism sector."

He said despite the many setbacks including the withdrawal of the US military and the eruption of Mount Pinatubo which made 250,000 people homeless and killed over 800, Subic Bay manage to bounce back and provide decent living standards for its people.

"Not only did we bounce back, we managed to achieve our success without compromising our principles of protecting nature, keeping the ocean clean and ensuring systematic development.

"I realise that in the tourism sector there is a need to be on the ball all the time and only by providing the best facilities and top class service can we hope to compete with other nations and we are working hard to achieve this," he said.

He said among the new initiatives that have been planned include finding ways to bring peace to Mindanao through negotiations with the various factions involved in guerilla activities so that the southern island could be turned into a tourist destination.

Mindanao, he said, can be a major tourist attraction especially since the province has a rich Muslim heritage which would attract Malaysians and those from other Islamic nations.

He said the security concerns in Mindanao would be addressed first and Arroyo was committed to bring peace there to ensure it is brought back to the mainstream of development.

Asked to give his impression on Malaysia, he said, he was "awestruck" by the development that has taken place in the past few years and the high standard of living enjoyed by the people was obviously a direct contribution of the well-planned and managed economy and the innovative ideas implemented by the Mahathir administration.

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