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Uganda-Malaysian

MALAYSIAN DOES HIS BIT AND MORE FOR UGANDA

By: Azman Ujang

KAMPALA, July 25 (Bernama) -- When Malaysian-born social worker Sekaran Vellasamy was posted to Uganda in 1987 to help out with some community work, he accepted the assignment with a heavy heart.

The east African nation was then struggling to recover from the economic and social destruction caused by the genocidal regime of President Idi Amin, the dictator who came to power in a coup d'etat in 1971 but was overthrown eight years later.

Despite knowing the hardships that his work would entail against the backdrop of a continent better known for its civil wars and famine, Sekaran decided to give a try.

But little did he realise that the Uganda that he had so much reservations for would be a place that he had grown to love, and 14 years later he is still here.

" When I arrived here, stories about Idi Amin's brutalities were still fresh in the people's minds. But now, Uganda is a country moving forward. I dare say it is a paradise of Africa and that's why I'm staying put," Sekaran told Bernama here.

Sekaran, 41, takes pride in telling about the work that he did to help poor Ugandan children under a US\$1.2 million project of the International Child Care Fund (ICCF).

As Programme Director for ICCF for seven years from 1991, he established a Children Centre that was later voted Uganda's best children home, had 10,000 children immunized, built mobile clinics and organised training and seminars for rural help workers and midwives.

Another important project is AIDS awareness programmes as Uganda is not spared the AIDS epidemic that is now sweeping across Africa.

With money from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Canada ICCF and Holland ICCF, Sekaran also carried out educational programmes for nursery, primary, secondary and vocational as well as literacy and teacher training programmes in this country of 18 million people.

" We also have agricultural programmes, providing high breed seeds and seedlings for extra production to increase household income and introduced nutritional gardens for better family diet," said Sekaran, who hails from Melaka.

But having done his welfare bit for the country, Sekaran decided four years ago to become a businessman, taking advantage of his contacts with government officials and the business community he was dealing with, especially those in the medical, construction, retail and the service industry.

He is now the owner and director of Nisha Distributors Ltd which markets Malaysian-made products, and sole distributor of Uganda's only Halal chicken, a joint-venture with a local Muslim businessman.

His "Ugachick" brand Halal chicken brings in a turnover of US\$1 million a year and makes up 80 per cent of the chicken needs of supermarkets, restaurants and hotels in Kampala city.

In February, Sekaran set up the Malaysian Business Centre (U) Ltd (MBC) aimed at promoting direct trade and investment activities between Malaysia and Uganda.

" MBC's objective is to provide a platform to create greater awareness in Africa of Malaysian manufactured products and services.

" Its aim is to market and promote effective business transactions between Malaysian companies and the African market in general, as well as Uganda and the surrounding region in particular," he said.

MBC currently promotes products manufactured by over 200 Malaysian companies and over 20 such manufacturers have appointed MBC as their agents in Uganda.

The products include rubber gloves, condoms, food and beverages, electrical appliances and other household products.

One of the most popular products is baby-wear, a sign of the growing purchasing power of the average family in Uganda, an agricultural country with a mainly export-oriented economy based on coffee, cotton, tea and tobacco.

The Ugandan economy is steadily picking up, thanks to the pro-business policy of President Yoweri Museveni, who also welcomed back the thousands of Asians whom Idi Amin expelled when he was in power.

The Asians formed the backbone of Uganda's business community.

" Our economy virtually collapsed when Idi Amin ordered them to leave the country within 90 days," said a senior government official.

Rish Patel, who runs a souvenir shop at the Kampala International Airport, said at least 5,000 Asian businessmen, mainly from India, have returned.

" But most of them returned to reclaim their property once forcibly taken over by Idi Amin's cronies. Many also sold their repossessed property as they have since set up homes in Britain and elsewhere," the government official added.

Sekaran is looking forward to next month's visit to Uganda by Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who will be here to attend the Global 2001 Dialogue, a meeting to foster smart-partnership among nations of the South, similar to the Langkawi and Southern Africa International Dialogue series.

The businessmen that are expected to accompany Dr Mahathir for his trip here are bound to further increase Malaysia-Uganda trade and investment.

" You have to come here to see what Uganda can offer," Sekaran said of the country where English is spoken even in the remotest villages and with an added incentive of having a climate as cool as being in an-conditioned room.

-- BERNAMA

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