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MALAYSIA-SINGAPORE

S'PORE ENVOY: CLOSER TIES BETWEEN M'SIA AND S'PORE NOW

KUALA LUMPUR, June 11 (Bernama) -- The close neighbourly co-operation between Malaysia and Singapore would bolster their resilience and strength to face a rapidly competitive world, Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia, K Kesavapany, said today.

The past one year has seen an improvement in the tone and atmosphere of their relationship, he told a luncheon organised by the Rotary Club of Pudu here.

More positive things were happening than the negative, he said.

In 2000 Singapore senior minister Lee Kuan Yew visited Kuala Lumpur after an absence of 10 years and was warmly received by the Malaysian leadership, he said.

His two-hour discussion with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad seemed to have given the bilateral relationship fresh momentum, said Kesavapany.

There has been a spate of exchanges between Singapore and Malaysian ministers to enhance bilateral ties and more of such exchanges were in store in the coming months, he said.

Last year, Malaysia became Singapore's number one trading partner again when it displaced the US from the top spot.

For the first time last year, bilateral trade between Singapore and Malaysia surged 34 percent to cross the S\$80 billion mark (about RM169.6 billion), an impressive jump considering the high base, said Kesavapany.

Singapore was also Malaysia's second largest trading partner after the US. Singapore's cumulative investment in Malaysia totalled S\$8.7 billion (about RM18.4 billion) and had become Malaysia's top ASEAN investor and the fourth largest foreign investor in the manufacturing sector.

The envoy also said the good ties between Malaysians and Singaporeans had gone down to the individual level.

"Singaporeans make up more than half of Malaysia's tourist arrivals. Malaysians make up a similar proportion of tourist arrivals in Singapore. Many of these trips are for vacation and business purposes.

"But a large proportion are also visits between families and friends. There are few Singaporeans without relatives in Malaysia and the same must be true the other way. These ties will remain strong in the future.

"Almost 10 percent of marriages registered in Singapore are with Malaysian citizens and this figure does not include Malaysians who are also Singapore permanent residents."

Kesavapany said he had always maintained that the conduct of bilateral relations should not simply be left to politicians and that every Malaysian and Singaporean had a role to play in fostering better relations.

He said political ties between the two countries would experience ups and downs, "but the historical, cultural and people-people ties should remain constant."

"These ties can act as a buffer, perhaps another pillar on which the strong foundations of the bilateral relationship can be built," he stressed.

Kesavapany also said that if one were to read the media headlines on bilateral relations between Singapore and Malaysia, one might sometimes be led to think that these relations were always difficult and volatile.

"However, the real picture in fact is very different. More positive things are happening than negative, especially in the area of

people-to-people relations."

The leaders on both sides had acknowledged the need for closer co-operation at a time when the region was going through a stressful period, he said.

Kesavapany said the close links between Singapore and Malaysia went beyond politics and economics.

He said, "The ties which bind us are multifaceted. They weave an intricate pattern of people-to-people interaction, reflecting the common history, culture and heritage that we share.

"We speak the same languages, observe the same customs, enjoy the same jokes and food. In a roomful of Malaysians and Singaporeans, it is hard to tell who is from which country." -- BERNAMA

FAY SHY