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Strengthening ties

K.P. Waran in Manila

"WE want Malaysians back!" was the response from newly appointed Tourism Secretary Richard Gordon when asked about future KL-Manila relations.

Speaking to the New Straits Times after taking his oath of office at the Malacanang palace yesterday, Gordon said he had a long standing relationship with Malaysian leaders and the corporate sector. "I intend to ensure that the long-standing relations nurtured during the time of ex-president Fidel Ramos returns, so that both countries can embark on projects that are mutually beneficial," he said.

Gordon, as chairman of the Subic Bay Metropolitan Area, had brought much industrial and tourist development to the region before ousted president Joseph Estrada replaced him.

Apart from making the Subic Bay a tourist attraction Gordon managed to lure US based courier service Fedex to move its regional operations there, and enticed many airlines to fly to Subic and Clark's airbase including Air Asia which flew regularly from Kuala Lumpur.

"Malaysians and Filipinos are from the same stock ... it is time we trace the common roots and embark on programmes to bring the people of both nations closer."

He added that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had invited him to Langkawi and with his new appointment as Tourism Secretary he intends to take up the offer soon.

"Malaysia is a successful model of what tourism can do for a country and I intend to study this and work on joint programmes."

He hopes to meet Malaysian Culture, Tourism and Arts Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir soon to discuss issues like increasing flights between the two countries and encouraging travel agencies to offer attractive packages for the people of both nations.

"I intend to help build bridges among the various sectors in our countries and strengthen relations."

He added that new president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo had accorded the Tourism Ministry a priority ministry and immediate steps would be taken to improve facilities and the service sector within the industry.

He plans to make Mindanao a major tourism area 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 in the southern state to ensure it is brought back to the mainstream of development.

He said the government was genuinely interested in settling the various conflicts at the negotiating table and apart from naming several prominent people from Mindanao into the Cabinet had also begun drawing up an agenda to tackle the issues.

Arroyo has also named Eduardo Ermita as presidential adviser to the peace process and named Tarlac Governor Margarita "Tingting" Cojuangco as presidential assistant to end the conflicts.

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