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Ties with Yemen to get a boost

Farush Khan

MALAYSIA is keen to establish closer ties with Yemen and this explains Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Aug 15-18 visit to the country, on the southeastern corner of the Arabian peninsula, which united as a single entity about a decade ago.

Yemen, a country of 10 million people, wants to reestablish itself as a trading nation and is very keen to have close relations with Malaysia. This was stated by the country's Foreign Minister Dr Abubaker Al-Qirbi during his brief visit here last week.

In an interview, Dr Abubaker said Yemen was very eager to learn as much as possible from Malaysia, the country they regarded as "one of the examples of success in the Muslim world".

"We feel that Muslim countries which are in the stage of development like Yemen should look at Malaysia as an example for their future development policies and planning."

He said policy makers in Yemen are excited about the visit to enable them to exchange views with Dr Mahathir and members of his delegation that could lead to mutual co-operation in economic, cultural or education fields and other fields. Some 30 Malaysian businessmen and bosses of in the corporate world are in the Prime Minister's entourage.

On the cards is a meeting between Dr Mahathir to discuss with Yemeni Prime Minister Abdul Kader Abdul Rahman Bajamal on the economic ties between the two countries and the possibility of establishing joint ventures, with Yemen having the opportunity to learn from Malaysia's vast experience.

On the sidelines of the discussion, two agreements are expected to be signed, one on the establishment of the Yemen-Malaysia Joint Commission to be headed by the respective foreign ministers, and the other, in the area of civil service co-operation and training.

The visit is also expected to establish better economic ties between the two countries, with potential Malaysian investors looking at possible trade ventures with Yemen businessmen.

It is understood that several Malaysian companies are also exploring the surrounding markets in Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Tanzania, situated across the Arabian Sea and on the east coast of the African continent.

They are looking at the prospect from the strategic location of Yemeni port city of Aden on the Red Sea.

The Yemeni Government, in its efforts to reestablish Aden as a entrepot port, is striving to develop an area known as the Aden Trade Zone. Some 31,000 hectares surrounding this city is said to have been earmarked for this purpose.

It is not only for trade but also manufacturing and industry. Many companies now have come to set up base in this area.

"We hope Malaysia will capitalise on this because Aden can easily be the gateway from East Africa to Sudan, down to Tanzania and even Madagascar - which altogether is a market of 150 million people," said Dr Abubaker.

While the present trade exchange between Malaysia and Yemen stands between RM70 million and RM200 million a year, there is more room for expansion.

Said the Yemeni Foreign Minister: "There is certainly greater potential for expansion considering that Malaysia is exporting more than 200 items

in the various sectors."

As part of the country's programme to be a trading nation, the Yemeni Government has also passed a number of legislation with the view of protecting investors in Yemen and pledged that Sana'a, its capital, would provide all the support and security needed.

Dr Abubaker feels Aden can be a real haven for investors from anywhere in the world, but they prefer that "our Muslim partners take advantage of it before others do".

Yemen also promises a vast potential in the tourism sector with its superb historical sites and geographical attractions.

These have not been really exploited till now and unfortunately some of the security incidents have affected its tourism industry. But Yemen is putting a lot of effort into encouraging companies that are interested in this area.

That's not all. They are also hoping that Yemen Air would fly to Malaysia "in the very near future", realising that direct air links can facilitate co-operation and make it easier for businessmen to travel between the two countries.

Like other countries, Yemen is not without its bouts of bad Press, but Dr Abubaker states that as far as the issue of instability is concerned "it is all exaggeration". Since the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, the country has gone through many economic, social and political difficulties.

Said Dr Abubaker: "But I think they are all behind us now. Yemen is now very stable and the security is as good as any other country. "And it is a multi-party democracy, perhaps the only one on the Arabian peninsula.

The Yemeni Government is also striving to ensure that there is equity and development in all parts of Yemen.

"This is a way of countering the bad reporting about Yemen by certain media," said Dr Abubaker.

Nevertheless, he said most people who had actually visited the country would only have fond memories of their stay as the Yemeni people are friendly and welcome visitors from any part of the world, Muslim or non-Muslim.

"Hospitality is in the nature of the Yemenis. We are looking forward to the visit by Dr Mahathir and all his colleagues and businessmen who will be accompanying him because we look at Malaysia as a future partner for Yemen."

Standing near the large window of the presidential suite on the 16th floor of the Regent Hotel in Bukit Bintang, Dr Abubaker watches in awe the breath-taking landscapes and skylines around him.

The Menara Kuala Lumpur and the KL Twin Towers loom high in the distance, together with other huge magnificent buildings. Being his second visit to Malaysia after 10 years, these changes understandably are all new and amazing to him.

"I must say the pace of progress and development here is tremendous," Dr Abubaker said during the interview last week.

He said his impression of Malaysia would have been better if he could spend more time travelling around the greater part of Kuala Lumpur and other parts of the country. Indeed, he realises that Malaysia has grown in leaps and bounds in term of physical development, not to mention those still in the pipeline.

Yemen is one of the world's most ancient countries and played an important part in Middle Eastern trade, supplying the ancient world with such exotic items as frankincense, myrrh, spices, condiment and other luxury items.

The southwestern coastal strait known as Bab El-Mandeb, which links the

Indian Ocean with the Red Sea, was an important trade corridor for about 3,000 years.

The coastal strip is known as the Hadramaut from where many Malaysians have ancestral links. Thus, there is some cultural links between the two countries.

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