

Allali confident of enhancing Morocco-Malaysia trade ties

DIPLOMATIC DESPATCHES

By Balan Moses

THE bow-tied young butler in white and black must have had much practice pouring the heady concoction of sweet Moroccan mint tea into tiny glasses like the one perched precariously at the tip of the table.

Not a drop of the piping hot liquid, poured from half a metre above, spilt. This was clearly to be expected of the native of an ancient land that takes pride in its Arab-Berber culture evolved over time into a unique way of life laced with a heavy infusion of French influence.

Moroccan Ambassador to Malaysia Dr Badre Eddine Allali is obviously a man who takes pleasure and pride in introducing guests to the traditional art of tea drinking which is almost *de rigueur* in his country.

This is his way of educating Malaysians in Moroccan culture and society and, more importantly, the hidden potential for bilateral relations, especially the trade opportunities awaiting Malaysian entrepreneurs.

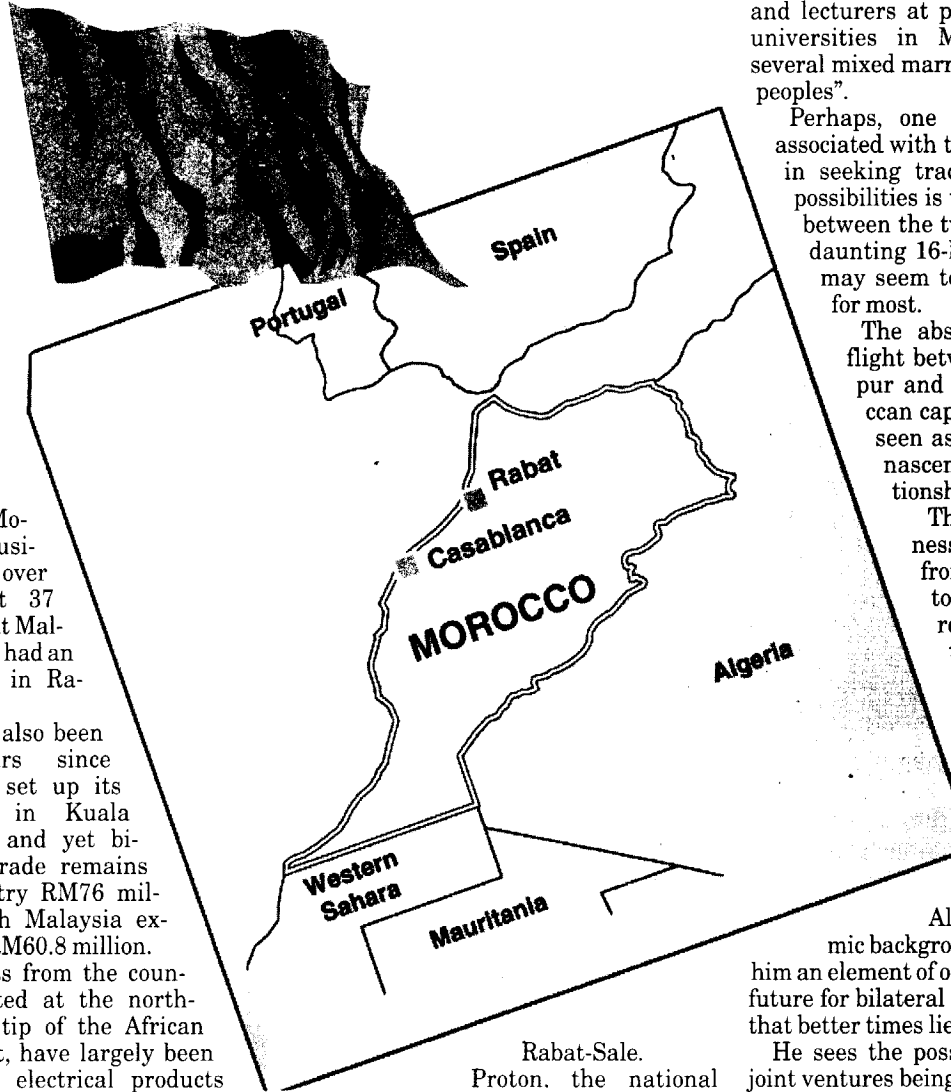
Malaysians know very little about Morocco besides the fact that it has a good football team, says Allali.

He says Malaysian Muslims will

and Moroccan businessmen over the past 37 years that Malaysia has had an embassy in Rabat.

It has also been 15 years since Morocco set up its mission in Kuala Lumpur and yet bilateral trade remains at a paltry RM76 million, with Malaysia exporting RM60.8 million.

Imports from the country, located at the north-western tip of the African continent, have largely been fish and electrical products



Rabat-Sale.
Proton, the national

and lecturers at public and private universities in Malaysia "besides several mixed marriages between our peoples".

Perhaps, one of the problems associated with the lack of interest in seeking trade or investment possibilities is the sheer distance between the two countries — a daunting 16-hour journey that may seem too far for comfort for most.

The absence of a direct flight between Kuala Lumpur and Rabat, the Moroccan capital, could also be seen as a damper on the nascent business relationship.

This is because businessmen and tourists from both sides have to take a circuitous route to arrive at the capitals.

Sea links between the two cities have also not been fully established, leading to difficulties in the freighting of export items.

Allali, whose economic background perhaps gives him an element of optimism about the future for bilateral trade, is confident that better times lie ahead.

He sees the possibility of several joint ventures being formalised in the

know of the general area referred to as Maghribi which includes Morocco and Algeria.

He is also proud that the Malaysian Government is educating Malaysians in his country in a very imaginative manner.

"The Government is exhibiting a piece of Moroccan art work using tiles, plaster and wood which will feature prominently at a pavilion being built in Putrajaya. It is a testimony to the friendship between our two nations," he says in an interview at his plush office in Menara Selangor Dredging in Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur.

The 46-year-old former economics professor's push for links to be forged between the two nations is evident in the enthusiasm with which he has been carrying out his job since his arrival in the Federal capital.

He can literally feel the potential for political and economic relations.

"There is so much we can offer each other. We just need to get to know each other better," he says with an intensity that reflects his seriousness in strengthening Morocco-Malaysia relations.

Both nations have sounded out each other on what each can offer towards a more meaningful relationship.

Yet, he is perplexed by the absence of tangible results from the numerous contacts forged between Malaysian

and, of course, handicraft, for which it is noted.

Malaysia has been exporting electronic products and rubber to the country, one of the three former French colonies and Berber-dominated nations. (The other two are Algeria and Tunisia.)

(The Berbers, incidentally, are recorded as the indigenous people of most of North Africa whose inter-marriages with Arabs over the years have led to a race with a unique Arab dialect, customs and mores that are quite distinct from that of the Middle East.)

Morocco, located strategically along the Straits of Gibraltar, also produces what is believed to be the softest leather in the world besides quality carpets, pottery, jewellery and brassware.

"While political relations are excellent between our countries, I cannot say the same about trade which has yet to reach full potential," he says, lamenting the fact that inquiries about trade opportunities on either side often remain at that level.

While smaller companies have yet to invest in Morocco, Petronas has taken the lead by venturing into oil exploration last year although Morocco has not been known as an oil-exporting nation.

The national petroleum company has exploration points in Tiznet in the south and in the offshore area of

car manufacturer, may also be linking up with the automobile industry in Morocco to manufacture car parts if negotiations succeed, he says.

"There have been several visits by Proton officials to Morocco and vice versa. I hope something will come out of this," he says, adding that there is a definite symbiosis between the two automobile industries.

Allali is also working towards encouraging Moroccan and Malaysian businessmen to set up a Malaysia-

not-too-distant future between businessmen who are fine-tuning the trade relationship in areas like construction, infrastructure and information technology.

"A number of companies are interested in IT ventures, sale of edible oils and co-operation in tourism," he says, adding that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Morocco last year was as a catalyst for better bilateral understanding.

The people of Morocco want a prosperous future and are willing to work for it. I and, I am sure, many in my country see Malaysia as model for us to follow. — Allali

Morocco Business Council that can provide the impetus for closer trade ties.

"I am thinking of this as it can play a role like what the Malaysia-Morocco Friendship Association is doing in my country," he says, adding that there are several Malaysian students on scholarship in Moroccan universities.

He says his wife is trying to get together a group of Malaysian women to visit Morocco.

There are also Moroccan students

Dr Mahathir witnessed the signing of 12 agreements in as varied fields as investment guarantees, scientific co-operation and information and media exchange.

The year before had seen his then counterpart, Abderrahmane Al Yousseoufi (the present Prime Minister is Driss Jettou, since Oct 9 last year), arriving for a four-day state visit and both sides signing several accords.

These included a memorandum of understanding on the formation of a

joint commission covering economic, technical, scientific and cultural aspects.

Allali says Morocco wants Malaysia to use the country as an entry point for Malaysian goods to the European market. And Morocco, he says, can use Malaysia as the staging point for Moroccan goods intended for Asean countries.

The envoy feels bilateral relationship can improve further if a proposed visit by Morocco's King Mohamed VI materialises next year.

"There is an official invitation for him to visit Malaysia and for the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to visit my country. This may happen next year," he said, adding that this would take bilateral ties to a new dimension.

To be sure, Morocco is at the level of development Malaysia was 20 years ago when Dr Mahathir embarked on a drive to modernise the agriculture-based economy and introduce manufacturing to Malaysians.

There is also a similarity in terms of history of colonisation: in Morocco's case, by France in 1912 which later saw independence a year ahead of Malaysia's in 1957.

Anyone expecting to find the romanticised version of Morocco portrayed in films like *Morocco*, which starred Marlene Dietrich, Humphrey Bogart's and Ingrid Bergman's *Ca-*

sablanca or Peter O'Toole's *Lawrence of Arabia* will be disappointed.

The swaying palms and tanned maidens and men enjoying the gentle sea breeze while gazing at the azure waters of the Atlantic Ocean is largely a figment of the imagination created by Americans seeking a catharsis from the rigours of the Great Depression and the Second World War.

While the idyllic setting is true even today, the story-book mystique of places like Casablanca, Tangiers and Marakkech that used to impress Europeans in the 19th and 20th centuries has been found out to be merely the imagination of American film-makers and novelists.

Allali says Morocco has come of age and is preparing to take its rightful place among developing nations.

"The people of Morocco want a prosperous future and are willing to work for it. I and, I am sure, many in my country see Malaysia as model for us to follow."

What does the future hold for the envoy who is coming close to the three-year mark in his term in Kuala Lumpur?

"I will continue to do what I have been sent here to do. At the end of the day, I would still like to go back to academia. I miss it," he says.

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