

13/06/2004

Malaysian hand in Sudan's economic growth

By Balan Moses

THE Sudanese are finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel after 21 years of civil war that almost split Africa's largest and, arguably, most economically promising nation.

With the peace accord between the Government of President Omar al-Bashir and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) signed and awaiting finalisation on June 22, the focus will definitely shift to economic development and a new beginning for the nation.

Interestingly, it will not be any of Sudan's nine immediate neighbours or the multitude of other African nations that will be among those at the forefront of progress in the Islamic country of 38 million people.

Rather, it will be Malaysia - separated by thousands of kilometres - that will be among the exclusive club of nations that will be lending a helping hand to Sudan.

The Malaysian presence is already being felt. Petronas stations dot the capital city of Khartoum (pronounced Hartoum) where the national petroleum corporation has also taken over selected Mobil kiosks.

The familiar green and black Malaysian logo is well on its way to being the standard-bearer for Malaysia in Sudan, coming in second only to China in terms of petroleum exploration rights.

Tenaga Nasional Berhad, meanwhile, is not too far behind in terms of exploring strategic interests in the energy-starved nation. It is said to be looking at the possibility of producing electricity in a country that depends to a large extent on the River Nile - the longest stretch of the world's longest river is in Sudan - for its irrigational needs.

Sudanese Ambassador to Malaysia, Abdel Rahman Hamza Elrayah, says the two giant companies are Malaysia's best known resources in his nation.

"Oil exploration started in Sudan in 1999 and Petronas entered our country soon after. After Sudan, it has gone on to 17 other African nations. We were a blessed beginning for Petronas," he said in an interview at his embassy housed in a bungalow along Jalan Ampang.

Abdel-Rahman is confident that Tenaga Nasional will be able to win contracts in his country, possibly in the construction and management of dams, given its proven track record in Malaysia.

Malaysia's unique brand of hospitality has also been exported to the Grand Holiday Villa hotel in Khartoum, a former government-owned hotel now run by Malaysians.

The soft-spoken diplomat who started working life as a teacher, but branched into diplomacy soon after, is excited about Malaysians joining hands with his Government and private sector to develop the nation which gained independence from the British on Jan 1, 1956, after a 57-year colonial past.

He says the chemistry seems just right for a blossoming of political and economic ties now between the two predominantly Muslim nations with large minorities.

"Sudan admires Malaysia for the speed with which it has progressed after independence. We want to learn from the Malaysian experience besides using Malaysian expertise and investment to develop our nation into a successful business-like nation." Malaysia appears to be in the right place at the right time.

Sudan is a success story waiting to be scripted with its 2.5 sq kilometres of land that ranges in diversity from desert to tropical

forests with large amounts of mineral to be mined.

The nation may have gained its name from "sudd" (Arabic for obstruction) in the vast and impenetrable papyrus swamp in the southern Sudan. Large tracts of land in the troubled south appear to be rich with petroleum, a possibility said to have expedited the resolution of the conflict between the northern and southern parts of the country.

It is also in the south that a pilot project is carried out on oil palm cultivation using Malaysian resources. "The results are looking very promising from the experimental cultivation being carried out."

According to Abdel Rahman, al-Bashir has indicated that Sudan should emulate Malaysia's progress as "our President has a very positive impression of your development under Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi".

Yet, there are numerous hurdles that need to be crossed before Sudan can achieve its potential. Infrastructure is one area where the nation is behind much of Africa, in part because of the huge land mass that has to be connected by roads, railways and other modes of transportation.

Sudan also has an ongoing civil unrest in its western Darfur region which has resulted in about 110,000 Sudanese fleeing to makeshift settlements along the Sudan-Chad border.

With the most promising latent economic potential, Sudan is on the threshold of progress provided it can muster the political will and human resources to put together a comprehensive development plan for the future.

The peace accord between the North and the South has far-reaching implications on development as it is based on power-sharing and administering of disputed areas. It appears that there will be an equitable 50-50 split of the country's wealth - particularly revenues from oil - between the North and the South.

"The war is coming to an end and we will divert our resources to development. I expect that we will be inviting investors into the country to help us build our nation," he says.

All this augers well for Sudan-Malaysia trade which, however, does not reflect the obvious symbiosis between the two nations. In 2002, Sudan imported RM68.1 million of products, exporting only RM800,000 worth to Malaysia. Abdel-Rahman does not exclude the possibility of trade using third parties like Singapore in the sales and purchase of items like internationally renown Sudanese cotton. Or Gum Arabic of which Sudan is the world's largest exporter or gold of which it exports 6.7 tonnes annually to countries around the globe.

Besides trade and investment, the two nations are also co-operating in the fields of religion and education.

According to the 52-year-old ambassador who arrived in Kuala Lumpur last month, Sudan is in the troika of the ministerial conference of the Organisation of Islamic Conference with Malaysia.

"We are working with Malaysia and other OIC members to change the negative view of Islam held by some quarters. We want to work with Malaysia in promoting the fact that Islam is a peaceful and progressive religion," says the former director of the Asian Affairs Department in the Sudanese Foreign Ministry.

There are at least 40 Sudanese academicians and 200 students in Malaysian universities.

He has an interesting tale to tell about his posting to Malaysia. It appears he was in Kuala Lumpur for a conference two years ago "and I fell in love with the place, its beauty, the people and development in general".

According to Abdel Rahman, a fellow Malaysian participant told him not to be surprised if he may be posted here as ambassador in the near future.

"And here I am. At that point, I never in my wildest dreams expect to be posted to Malaysia." But the envoy's first love is definitely Khartoum which he describes as a beautiful city of three "islands" linked by bridges.

This will certainly help him play a crucial role in forging indelible links between Malaysia and Sudan.

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