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## Namibia wants a greater Malaysian presence

Balan Moses

TO Malaysians, Namibia might be just a name linked to South Africa's difficult past. But to the average Namibian, Malaysia is virtually God's gift to the land of 1.8 million people living in an area eight times the size of the peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak put together.

The link is a little-known Malaysian textile company, Ramatex, which has literally changed the economic landscape by providing thousands of jobs to Namibians.

The benefits accruing from the jobs go beyond mere employment opportunities; they are the fruits of freedom for a people denied their just dues for decades.

Namibian High Commissioner to Malaysia Neville Gertze cannot stop talking about Ramatex and what its involvement in Namibia means to his country.

Every second word uttered in a recent interview seemed to be related to Ramatex and the changes that it has brought to Namibian society.

Such is the company's profile in Namibia that its RM380 million investment in the south-western African nation is recorded in its official investment profile brochure distributed around the world.

He is equally loquacious about Malaysia in general and the role that Malaysian businessmen can play in developing the nascent democracy.

"I have a clear and definite objective here.

"I feel an urgent need to introduce Namibia to Malaysians.

"After all, the biggest investment in Namibia outside of mining is from Malaysia's Ramatex," he said at his Wisma HLA office along Jalan Kia Peng in Kuala Lumpur.

The office is part of his personal effort to give Malaysians what he calls "the right picture about Namibia".

His earlier office in another part of the city did not quite carry the impression of a nation in a hurry to catch up with the rest of the developed world.

"I told my superiors about the need to move and they told me to go ahead if I could do it on my own. Well, here we are now," he added.

Gertze is eager to help his country make up for the lost years when apartheid robbed the indigenous people of basic rights, keeping them in the grip of poverty in a land naturally blessed with wealth.

This is the paradox that the 38-year-old Gertze and his countrymen hope to overcome as fast as possible to take Namibia to its rightful place under the sun.

And he is banking on Malaysia's historical relationship and support for the cause of his people during the liberation war to further Namibia's development agenda.

He fondly remembers Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad as one of the few world leaders who took the fight against apartheid to South Africa's doorstep.

"Malaysia has always been friendly to us, especially in the liberation war. It is a constant reminder of what Malaysia has done for us."

According to Gertze, Namibia must easily be the best place in Africa to invest.

It offers a zero-tax climate for products manufactured in the country for export, it is a beneficiary of quota exemption by the US and has preferential trade and business status in US and Europe.

This is what he wants Malaysian businessmen to exploit.

"Malaysian businessmen should invest in our country because of a host of reasons as I have mentioned. Most of all they will see a willingness in our Government to facilitate trade that may not be possible in most countries," he said.

One cannot stop Gertze from telling the Ramatex story which seems to be the crowning glory of the Malaysian presence in Namibia.

"They (Ramatex) chose us over South Africa after two years of negotiations with the country. I believe they chose us because the pace of negotiations with us impressed them.

"While Ramatex has given us 10,000 jobs, the company's impact has gone beyond this because of the secondary effect of jobs on families."

The first-time head of mission who had a stint as commercial counsellor in South Africa has another proposition for Malaysians - grow cotton in Namibia.

Those who know Namibia will also acknowledge that the Namib and Kalahari deserts (the film *The Gods Must be Crazy* was shot here) render a large part of the nation useless for cultivation.

And ambitious as they are, the Namibians have identified land in the northern part of the country for cotton.

To be sure, Ramatex uses cotton from South Africa.

Gertze has done his homework in the seven months that he has been here with part of his research in the Malaysian furniture-making industry.

He is confident that Malaysians can use the high quality timber in the limited northern forests in Namibia to fashion exports.

Gertze and his Government obviously are firm believers in the home truth that one should make the best of things and not complain about what life has dealt the country.

Take the deserts that crowd Namibians into a very much smaller space than they should.

The Namibians have discovered that the silicon from the sand dunes is ideal for the manufacturing of computer chips.

The father of two is effusive when it comes to Malaysia.

"I was overjoyed when told I was coming here. Malaysia is a showcase of what can be achieved when the people and government work well."

Is it a policy in Namibia for senior diplomats to be as young as him?

"I do not really represent the mean age of senior civil servants although there are many young people in top positions.

"After all, 60 per cent of our people are below 40 years."

What is of immediate importance in his agenda?

"I want to boost trade between our two nations, get Malaysians to know about Namibia and vice versa and enhance political and diplomatic ties."

But his pet project is to get a breakfast or lunch discussion going at the boardroom at the high commission in the nearest future.

"This will help improve understanding on the Malaysian-Namibian trade, political, cultural and social relationship besides clearing the air from time to time on contemporary issues involving the full extent of the bilateral links."

With Gertze's determination and drive, Namibia may very well be a household name in Malaysia by the time he leaves for his next port of call.

\* Note: Malaysia exports about RM180 million in machinery, electronics and industrial equipment to Namibia which exports less than RM6 million in mining products, especially diamonds, to Malaysia.