

04/04/2004

Surviving with gusto

Balan Moses

CUBA. The word conjures a land of song, romance, resilience, indomitable courage and strength in adversity. Many people are amazed at the staying power of this nation of 11 million.

It has not only stood up to the economic and political hurdles placed in its path by the world's greatest power and neighbour the United States, and some of its allies, it has also won international acclaim for its tenacity.

Whether or not one agrees with Cuba's domestic politics - an amalgam of communism and home-grown socialism - or the ideals of the charismatic Fidel Castro, is immaterial in the final analysis.

What is important is this: the largest of the Antilles group of islands has not only survived a four-decade economic blockade by the US but has made its presence felt around the globe.

It has not been easy, but Cuba has shown the determination of a people under seige. When Castro received accolades from the leaders gathered in Malaysia for the Non-Aligned Movement meeting last year, it was testimony to the life of a man who found his own definition of national success.

Today, the Cuban presence abroad, despite and in spite of imposed and self-created constraints, is a matter of simple record.

Cuban cigars - Havanas - are smoked in every corner of the world including Kuala Lumpur, Cuban lobsters are eaten in cordon bleu restaurants the world over and Cuban icecream is the delight of children and adults in many countries.

Cuban Ambassador to Malaysia Pedro Monzon Barata exemplifies his country's spirit of fighting the odds, come what may, with his boundless energy and innovative spirit which has helped introduce Cuba to Malaysians.

He is quick, however, to point out that this is also the spirit of almost all Cubans who have faced all sorts of problems since the revolution of 1959 resulted in the ostracisation of Cuba by most nations.

The US economic, financial and trade blockade continues today and, for their part, Cubans continue to manage, finding new ways to overcome the scarcity of goods and services most Malaysians take for granted. If truth be told, the US sanctions may have actually helped mould the modernday Cuban with his ability to make the best of things under dire conditions.

"We have managed to survive and grow as a nation because of our strength of spirit. We will never give up on what we hope to achieve," he said in a recent interview at his office-cum-home at a sprawling bungalow in the diplomatic enclave off Jalan U Thant in Kuala Lumpur.

It is difficult to disbelieve the first-time head of mission who has a weakness for Filipino barong shirts and quick shots of espresso several times a day. In the two years that he has been here, Barata has managed to persuade delegations from several Malaysian universities to visit Cuba and sign agreements on joint academic ventures, brought in cultural troupes including the Lady Salsa group and Cuban artists and is trying to convince the Malaysian Government to employ Cuban doctors and nurses.

He is now "fighting to get sponsors" to bring in the Havana Nights troupe of renowned dancers. Barata, who took over in 2002 from Teresita Fernandez, the first-ever Cuban ambassador to Malaysia, may also be credited in part for the rising Malaysian passion for Cuban food and wines.

Not bad for a man who suffered a heart attack not too many years ago that put him in a sedentary job but who fought the odds to come to Kuala Lumpur as envoy.

Barata's mission in Malaysia is simple: to build on the unique relationship between Castro and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and take it to a new dimension with the help of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"I am also convinced that the relationship between both our nations can grow under Abdullah's leadership. He is very intelligent and will be able to see the benefits of enhancing bilateral ties," he says.

Cuba's worst days were in the early 1990s when the Soviet Union collapsed, leaving its allies in economic disarray.

Barata says it was a defining moment in Cuban history as the nation looked within itself for the strength to keep the country together.

"We had to keep the nation going. With the help of our friends around the world we managed to keep the nation together and here we are in 2004 as strong as we were earlier," he says.

It is interesting to study Cuban history, especially that of the 19th and 20th centuries when the nation came into its own as a force to be reckoned with. This is detailed, among other examples of Cuban nationalism, in a book entitled 100 questions and answers about Cuba in its ninth edition.

It is a frank account of why the nation is what it is today - a poor but seemingly contented people finding joy in arguably small things while appearing to ignore the physical and fiscal development of other nations in the 21st century.

Some of the chapters are as follows: "Why is there just one political party and why is it important to continue to have just one party?", "Is Cuban emigration a political or an economic phenomenon?" and "Do Cubans like to dance?"

The foreword says it all about the Cuban spirit: "...We are the privileged protagonists in an unrepeatable feat, a heroic David permanently confronted by a powerful Goliath that is set on destroying us."

Barata summed it up succinctly in reply to a question on what the Cuban definition of success by saying: "Social justice is the most fundamental part of the Cuban system."

Today, many parts of old Havana remain almost as they were hundreds of years ago, narrow streets flanked by solid Spanish-styled buildings with balconies.

Ageing American-made cars in excellent condition save for their outdated designs run on roads trod by horses hundreds of years ago.

And there are no homeless on the streets, there is free medical care for all, with illiteracy literally unheard of.

The Malaysian interest in Cuba may in part be connected to the manner in which Havana has battled hostile forces with determination and some measure of success. The Malaysian connection has grown since diplomatic relations were established nearly 30 years ago. Cuba is being seen with renewed interest by a new generation of younger Malaysians not really familiar with its difficult past.

"Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein (now Education Minister) went to Cuba last year when he was Youth and Sports minister. He was truly taken up by what he saw, especially with what we were doing with youths," says Barata whose easy laughter regularly punctuated the 90-minute interview.

The former director of Foreign Relations in the Cuban Ministry of Culture sees immense potential in tie-ups between Cubans and Malaysians, the fact that Cuba is a communist nation relegated to a point of academic

interest as in the case of China.

Barata, who acknowledges that "Malaysia is a very distant place for the average Cuban," wants to familiarise his countrymen with Malaysia.

"Cubans know a little about Malaysia, thanks in part to a popular television series some time ago called Sandokan which told a story about a local hero in Sarawak," he says. But this image needs to be updated.

He wants to bring Cuba's cutting edge in biotechnology and genetic engineering (it is an acknowledged world leader) to Malaysia.

"We want biotechnology to be at the heart of the relationship we are building with Malaysia. There is a lot of potential for Malaysia-Cuban joint ventures in this field. We have managed to produce vaccines for many diseases which can help Malaysians too."

He plans to showcase Cuban achievements in a Cuban week planned at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang in June.

"USM Vice-Chancellor Prof Datuk Dzul kifli Abdul Razak is a kindred spirit who has a special love for Cuba. He has been there several times. In fact, Penang is like a second home to me and other Cubans coming to Malaysia," he says.

There is also scope for Malaysian participation in the import of Cuban wines and beers (they have been brought in on a trial basis), Cuban coffee, lobsters (they come via Japan now) and an increase in the import of cigars.

Barata, an occasional cigar smoker, warns of fake Havanas flooding the Asian market.

Cuba also wants to import Malaysian technology in power generation to set up independent power plants besides joint ventures in its nascent petroleum industry. He is doing his best to nurture people-to-people ties through the fledgling Malaysia-Cuba Friendship Association that is awaiting registration here.

The father of two grown sons - Claudio and Diego - says with a chuckle that he is one of two Cuban diplomats in Malaysia, "the other being my wife Sylvia Baeza who has her specific duties as wife of the ambassador which keeps her quite busy." Barata is an art lover who used to take time off in previous assignments to paint.

"I have managed to buy an easel, canvas and brushes here but have not managed to find much time to put them to good use," says the former deputy head of mission in Japan who has a collection of acrylic and pencil works.

It is easy to see where Cuban-Malaysian relations are headed with the Baratas at the helm.