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There's more to Cuba than salsa

By Arni Shahida Razak

WHO would have thought that Malaysia would one day collaborate with Cuba, a country once considered as an advocator of communism?

When former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir urged Malaysians to forge close trade and investment ties with Cuba in 1997, many thought he was foolish to do so. After all, why would any country want to incur the wrath of certain powerful nations by befriending governments that these powers have labelled as enemies?

Now, many are beginning to see the benefits of befriending Cuba.

"There's a lot to learn from Cuba. It's surprising to know that though Cuba had to go through four decades of economic blockade by the United States, it not only survived, but has managed to excel in many areas such as biotechnology, vaccinology and brain-science. We want to capitalise on their expertise," said Professor Asma Ismail, a member of the Universiti Sains Malaysia-Cuba collaboration team.

Malaysia and Cuba, she said, had both expressed interest in collaborating in vaccine development against infectious disease, development of monoclonal antibodies against cancer, biotechnology techniques in fish feed and fish production and human resource development programmes.

"USM is interested in working with Cuba in medical biotechnology, which includes diagnostics, vaccinology, pharmacogenomics, stem-cell engineering and biomaterials. We also want to collaborate in neuro-science and aquaculture," she said.

Teams from USM first visited Cuba in September last year and established a number of connections. General memorandums of understanding were signed with Finlay Institute and the Centre of Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (CIGB). USM also signed an agreement concerning its collaborative work in developing a tuberculosis vaccine with Finlay.

"The Cubans are very generous with sharing knowledge," she said. "For instance, USM would like to expand in the area of vaccinology, but we just don't have the infrastructure to make vaccines. Cuba can provide us with the facilities and expertise. After all, Cuba's strength in biotechnology happens to be in vaccine development and production. This is the essence of the collaboration with USM."

To further strengthen ties with Cuba, USM also recently organised a USM-Cuban week from May 28 to June 6 to introduce the Cuban technology to Malaysians.

"We brought in seven Cuban scientists and they gave talks to our scientists on neuroscience, vaccinology and biomaterials. There were also intensive discussions held between the scientists to develop grantproposals," she said.

The idea of the partnership, she said, was to combine resources and share expertise among the two countries.

"At the end of the day, its a win-win situation for both countries. We want to explore the wonders of science together so that it benefits both countries," she said.

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