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New Algeria on the horizon

By Balan Moses

THERE was a time when Algeria was out of bounds by choice to the rest of the world due to a civil war that never seemed to abate.

Those days are largely over with the giant of a nation finally set to come into its own.

It has been a long and hard road for the second largest nation in Africa after Sudan, rising from decades of tumult to a relative peace.

Stronger economies in Europe and Asia are giving a second look at a nation that has almost everything going for it.

Algeria has the seventh largest reserves of natural gas (second largest exporter) in the world, the 14th largest oil reserves around the globe and a viable political situation that holds promise for investment.

And this is good enough reason for Malaysia's interest to be piqued.

More Malaysian delegations are flying into Algiers than possibly ever before, following the stepping-up of contacts between Kuala Lumpur and Algeria in recent years.

Representing a variety of sectors, they have been looking at the potential for business, investment, cultural exchanges and international geo-political alliances.

Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim was probably the last senior Malaysian official there late last year at a meeting of Organisation of Islamic Conference culture ministers.

Close on his heels was an International Islamic University delegation.

The fact that Algeria and Malaysia are on the threshold of a long, lasting and potentially productive relationship is not lost on Algerian ambassador to Malaysia, Amar Belani.

"Our relations have never been better than they are today," says the suave 51-year-old envoy at his embassy in a bungalow along a quiet side-street off Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur.

It was just a little more than a year ago when his predecessor, Rachid Bladehane, spoke of the potential for closer Algeria-Malaysia relations.

He spoke about the possibility of Malaysians investing in infrastructure, agriculture, public works, the pharmaceutical field, tourism, information and communications technology in Algeria.

And today, some of the his dreams are well on the way to realisation. Ranhill is looking at some very important infrastructure and construction projects.

Among other mammoth projects on the cards are a 1,200km highway linking the eastern and western parts of the country.

Petronas has already been in Algeria since eight years ago.

Belani says his country needs one million houses "and we know that Malaysia has the expertise and means to do this".

The money is there: Algeria has set aside RM200 billion to be spent over the next five years on infrastructure projects.

The soft-spoken envoy, who plays football and tennis in his leisure time, is particularly excited about what will take shape in a little township called Sidi Bouabdullah in the long term.

The Algerians want to build a Cyberjaya look-alike in the town, 40km from Algiers, where the next capital city may be located.

And towards this end, they have signed a memorandum of understanding with Malaysia which Belani admits needs to be fine tuned.

"I have made arrangements to meet senior Foreign Ministry officials soon

to get this project going," the French-speaking former ambassador to Poland says, while apologising for his "lack of English".

What he does not say is that the idea of "exporting" Cyberjaya to Algeria may have had its roots in Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's two visits to Malaysia.

But the person who may have taken Algerian interest a notch higher may have been former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who spoke about a multi-media super-corridor in the African nation during a visit in 2003.

The ICT hub in Sidi Bouabdullah and a multitude of other issues may see closer scrutiny at the first meeting of the Algerian-Malaysian joint commission in Algiers perhaps later this year.

Belani is hoping that this will lead to, among other things, the setting up of an Algerian-Malaysian Business Council in Kuala Lumpur.

How have the first two months been for Belani and his wife, Halimah?

"The seven-hour time difference has been playing havoc on our lives. When they call me from Algiers in the afternoon, it is early in the morning here."

But he is the first to know what has happened overnight in Algeria by scanning the Internet, while his fellow civil servants are still sleeping in Algeria.

(END) Source : New Straits Times