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Algeria's resilience surprises many

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THE terribly divided and abjectly poor land that Algeria was painted as in movies like Beau Geste - arguably the Western benchmark on the nation for most of the early 20th century - is no more.

It is also not a country embroiled any longer in civil disturbances that have undermined repeated efforts over the past 41 years of independence to restore the glory of its distant past.

Today, the troubled Algeria that Ahmad Ben Bella inherited after the French tricolour was finally lowered is valiantly trying get back on track, both politically and economically.

This cannot, of course, be taken to mean that all's well in this fabled nation of geographic contrasts that include deserts and snow-topped mountains.

Despite all its troubles, it boasts the second largest economy in the continent after South Africa.

The economy is still recovering from four decades of uncertainty with tentative steps being taken to expand its scope from the traditional interest in oil and gas to areas like chemicals and electronics.

Terrorist activities have been largely brought under control by the government of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika who has done much to restore the democratic process.

These positive developments reflect Algeria's resilience and the resourcefulness of its people which have been translated in recent years into achievements that have surprised most of the world.

This will be the tableau that will unfold before Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he lands at the Algiers-Houri Boumediene Airport (named after former president) in Algiers today.

The Prime Minister will be introduced to a country that has defied the odds by bravely facing religious zealots, economic difficulties resulting from political uncertainty and a general lack of cohesion going back to its troubled history.

Yet, the very mention of Algeria to those abreast of developments on the international front will inevitably elicit opinions that veer more to the negative.

This is the challenge that has taken up much of the time and effort of Algerian ambassador to Malaysia, Rachid Bladhane, over the three years that he has been in Kuala Lumpur.

The slightly-built 46-year-old, who displays the nervous energy common to those with a mission to accomplish, is ready to pounce on any opportunity to tell Algeria's success story.

"We are trying to restructure our economy. It is a long process that takes time and effort. We are doing well at the moment and hope to improve in all respects in future," he said in a recent 90-minute interview.

For him, Dr Mahathir's visit is the start of a new era in Malaysia-Algeria ties that portends an exciting time ahead for both nations.

This is a feeling probably accruing from the fact that the Prime Minister has exhibited a keen eye in the past for prospective bilateral political and economic co-operation with countries he has visited.

"There are numerous areas in which we can work together like in agriculture, public works, the pharmaceutical field, tourism, information and communication technology. The list is endless," he says.

There is obviously a tremendous amount of synergy between the two

nations.

Bladehane says Malaysia can use Algeria to export products to the European Union with which the country has a free trade agreement.

The bilateral trade balance stood at RM431 million last year in Malaysia's favour with Algeria importing mainly palm oil, electronics, furniture and wood products.

Malaysian imports were largely electronics, plastic products and palm oil.

The envoy, who is also accredited to the Philippines and Thailand, says the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak put paid to hopes of increasing bilateral trade this year.

Bladehane feels that a Malaysia-Algeria Business Council will be a good idea to educate businessmen on both sides of the divide on potential for trade.

A road show to highlight potential areas of investment in Algeria and its development record is on the cards.

TV3 has, to some extent, carried out a public relations job for Algeria with its programme Jejak Rasul which explained Algerian society to Malaysians.

There are also Algerian students and lecturers at Malaysian varsities.

On political relations, he gushes that ties are very good despite the fact that embassies were opened on both sides only two years ago.

"Already, the Economic Planning Unit in the Prime Minister's Department has done an audit of the Algerian economy to identify the areas in which Malaysians can participate.

Petronas has a seven-year old relationship with Algeria which Bladehane feels is just the right thing to encourage other Malaysians to venture into the country.

The national petroleum corporation also has a RM3.6 billion investment in a petrochemical project along with its counterpart in Algeria, Sonotrack, and Gas de France.

He is extremely happy that a group of 50 businessmen are accompanying Dr Mahathir "as they will be able to see for themselves what we can offer and the potential for trade."

What is the extent of the Algerian presence in Malaysia?

"There are some Algerians managing their own companies in Malaysia while others are working with Malaysian companies."

Algeria and Malaysia also have an active interest in Islamic co-operation especially where the Organisation of Islamic Conference which will hold its summit in Kuala Lumpur in October is concerned.

The mild-mannered Bladehane who has been the very personification of patience throughout the interview becomes agitated the minute the issue of foreign media coverage of Algeria is concerned.

"Their (foreign) media coverage is usually based on outdated perceptions of Algeria. They have not understood the reality of the current situation," he says exasperated with the bad press that continues.

He cites an incident where he was personally present when a bomb exploded "and within two minutes of the incident, a foreign wire service was already saying that one person had been killed.

"I was right there and knew personally that no one had been killed and yet they exaggerated the seriousness of the situation."

He is quick to point out that Algeria is not being overly-sensitive about foreign media coverage as there is an extremely vocal local Press for whom nothing is sacred including politicians and government servants.

Bladehane draws a parallel between the predicament his country has found itself in with what some wire services and international television channels put Malaysia through several years ago when their coverage of

small and isolated demonstrations was magnified.

He says Algeria wants to fight this trend of misreporting of his country by ensuring the outflow of accurate information to the international community.

There are plans to forge an understanding between the Algerian Press Service and the national news agency, Bernama, on exchange of news.

While Bladehane is well-known on the diplomatic scene, his wife, Saida, is equally popular on the society scene.

The envoy, whose French-accented English betrays the all-pervasive nature of the colonial culture, is quick to laugh and crack jokes which punctuated most of the interview.

He took a few liberties with the fact that Saida sometimes received more Press exposure than him in her capacity as head of the association of wives of heads of diplomatic missions.

But he is not complaining.

If anything, he is proud of the fact that she is helping him with the task of educating the world on a much-misunderstood Algeria.