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Emphasis on improving trade ties

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ROBERTO Ibarra, the Chilean Ambassador to Malaysia, may be forgiven if he wished that the robust state of his health reflected that of bilateral trade.

Chile-Malaysia trade ties are not exactly flourishing, and not for want of trying by the gregarious lawyer turned diplomat.

While workouts three times a week at a leading gym have helped keep him trim, repeated efforts to rejuvenate Chile-Malaysia trade which sank to the doldrums after the 1997 Asian financial crisis have not been as successful.

Ibarra has been facing an uphill task over the past 21 years trying to put the clock back on bilateral trade ties which were almost devastated six years ago.

He speaks of the topic with almost missionary zeal, his face often revealing the depth of emotions associated with the ups and downs in the bilateral relationship.

In the euphoria of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's visits to Chile in the early 1990s, Chilean and Malaysian businessmen established a joint committee of sorts to explore trade possibilities.

"But everything ended when the bad times came with the crisis in 1997. But the time has come to reinvigorate trade ties. I believe there is a will on both sides to do this."

At this juncture, all he really wants is put trade relations back on an even keel.

It is what every Chilean diplomat probably desires with Chile on the road to recovery after difficult domestic politics from 1973 following the death of President Salvador Allende.

The next two decades were a trying time under Gen Augusto Pinochet when Chile found itself on the wrong side of many countries.

With things looking up now for Chile under a promising leadership that is looking to heal the wounds of the last three decades, Ibarra is resolute about doing something about the bilateral relationship, starting with trade.

To him, as to many, the health of Chile-Malaysia bilateral relations is sometimes, and quite unfairly, measured by the trade balance.

To some extent, this may be due to the fact that a large part of the trade is restricted to steel and copper imports from Chile which were the first to suffer when the financial crisis kicked in.

"When steel and copper imports fall, as they have since 1997, the entire trade relationship suffers," he said in a recent interview.

Ibarra, always the optimist, is confident that things will be looking up in time when businessmen on both sides better understand the dynamics of trade between the two nations.

A large Malaysian trade delegation visited Chile in 2001 and Ibarra hopes this will signal the start of similar visits in future.

The potential for bilateral trade is, therefore, enormous says the bachelor who is passionate about the subject.

He has a bagful of facts to shore his case.

To start with, Chile is Asia's number one trading partner in Latin America (33.1 per cent of Chilean exports come to Asia) and there are too many commonalities between the nation and Malaysia to ignore.

To seal his proposition, he points to the fact that the two peoples come

from almost the same mould in terms of national personality.

"What I like about Malaysia is that it thinks big. Chile may be a small country but we also like to think that we are world players. This is where there is a definite symbiosis between our two countries," said Ibarra.

There was more than symbiosis when Chile and Malaysia, along with many other countries, were sidelined by the United States for their opposition to the United States' invasion of Iraq.

A trade agreement with Chile was delayed amidst much nail-biting in the country before eventually being signed earlier this month.

There was fear in Chilean circles that the US would drop Chile in favour of Singapore, a traditional American ally.

Ibarra is uncomfortable with the suggestion that Malaysians popularly believe that Chilean wine and food reflect the full extent of the bilateral relationship.

A man of impeccable taste who luxuriates in the finer things of life, including fine wine and a taste in music that leans heavily towards Mahler, Bach and Mozart, he still does not want to limit bilateral trade to these.

There is much, he feels, that can be done in new areas like aquaculture (Chile has one of the longest coast-lines in the world) and mining (its copper mines made early fortunes in the country).

And he has done something about it, albeit in his own diplomatic style which has earned him numerous friends in Kuala Lumpur.

Chilean Deputy Foreign Minister Christian Barros was in town earlier this month to meet Foreign Ministry secretary-general Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak to discuss details of a technical study on how to revitalise bilateral trade relations.

On the cards is the possibility of Malaysia using Chile as a gateway for trade with 300-million-strong Latin America as a whole.

"The study will involve meetings with Malaysian businessmen. We earnestly want to re-establish the healthy bilateral trade links that existed before 1997," he says.

The figures speak for themselves. Chilean-Malaysian trade amounted to RM813 million in 1997 but fell drastically to RM350 million last year.

Chilean exports to Malaysia amounted to RM82 million last year mainly in copper and steel with Malaysian exports amounting to nearly RM270 million.

He said potential Chilean investments in Malaysia could be in fisheries, especially aquaculture, and mining where Chile has extensive experience.

Chile is keen to establish some form of co-operation in information technology.

"There is a lot we can learn from Malaysia's lead in the field which is evident in the establishment of the Multimedia Super Corridor. Chile feels there is a role for Malaysia in the development of the Chilean IT industry," he said.

The 52-year-old lawyer-turned diplomat is, however, not worried about bilateral political relations which have been given a clean bill of health by both sides.

This can be seen in the possibility of high-level visits between the two nations in the near future.

Chilean Foreign Minister Soledad Alvear, expected here later this year, will be the second high-level Chilean Government representative here after Barros.

The visits are expected to culminate in Chilean President Ricardo Lagos' official visit to Malaysia in 2005.

Malaysia is special for Ibarra for many reasons. He underlines Malaysia's leading role in the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation, whose meeting Chile will host next year.

"We appreciate Malaysia's role in Apec and we want your country's collaboration in helping make it a successful meeting," he said, hoping that Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will be in Santiago for the meeting.

He is convinced that Abdullah will continue to provide the support for a deepening of Chilean-Malaysia ties.

Ibarra is also a Fan of Malaysia and Dr Mahathir.

"Dr Mahathir was the one who opened new ground in our bilateral relationship with two visits to our country. He is the one who laid the ground work on which we can now build on."

Ibarra comes across as being a little jealous about Argentina when he says that "Dr Mahathir should cross the Andes to our country".

He waxes lyrical about Malaysia and its charms but loves to talk about the people.

"I have made very good friends here in Malaysia. I love the people and the way they open their hearts and homes to you. This kind of hospitality is very similar to what we have back home in Chile."

Ibarra is very much a family man who visits Chile at least twice a year to renew links with his family which has business interests in agriculture.

"We come basically from farmer's stock although my father was a judge and some relatives have been in the legal fraternity. But for me, it was always diplomacy that I wanted," said the man of varied talents to a question on how he entered foreign service.

He is also taken up by the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board's slogan of "Malaysia: Truly Asia" which he feels is a home truth.

"You come to realise it after a little while here."

"One of the reasons I have to go to the gym so often is that I love the food here. I have to work to burn off the fat that will accumulate. You have to work work hard to keep trim."

This perhaps symbolises in a nutshell Ibarra's credo in professional life - constantly working to keeping Chile-Malaysia relations healthy.