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## Ensuring bilateral ties stay healthy

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DR ABRAHAM Sokhaya Nkomo is still very much in the business of identifying ailments and prescribing treatment - albeit in a different theatre of operation - despite not having practised family medicine for the past nine years.

His sole task these days is ensuring the vitality of his only patient, South Africa-Malaysia relations, with a regimen of diplomatic craft based on the strength of bilateral relations and his personal conviction that a healthy future awaits both nations.

Indeed, his office in Kuala Lumpur resembles that of a physician, exuding a warmth that inspires confidence in the occupant and his staff.

Documents pile on his ample table and the books that sit on his shelves are tools of trade often used pre-emptively to lance boils that may erupt from time to time to threaten bilateral ties.

The South African High Commissioner to Malaysia is clearly at home in medicine or politics. But then, he has never really seen a difference between the two.

Even as he began practising family medicine more than 30 years ago, he realised that one could only provide wholesome treatment to patients if the socio-economic and political environment was sound.

"If not, they will keep coming back. Unless you optimise the socio-economic environment, you are not going anywhere. The patient will still keep coming back," the former head of the South African Government's committee on health said in a recent interview at his bungalow-turned-embassy.

"If you want to restore people to good health, you have to go the whole hog."

And this is why the man who has seen the worst of apartheid, probably the most hated system of governance in the last century, left his much-loved vocation in 1994 to represent Pretoria as an MP in what he describes as "an expression of activism for freedom".

To be sure, the soft-spoken and avuncular father of six - three of whom are in medicine - always had politics in his blood.

Even when he was dispensing cough mixture and vitamins to poor black people who had nowhere else to turn to, he was acutely aware of the injustice that was undermining society and his role in easing the pain of his people.

The envoy who has been in the country for the past 18 months learnt early that one had to help himself in South Africa as the apartheid system was geared towards helping the whites.

To hear Dr Nkomo talk about his entry, and that of thousands of other professionals, into politics in his low whisper may sound like it is coming from a page in a story book.

But one can be assured that it was real to all, especially the thousands of Nelson Mandelas and Steve Bikos who sacrificed their lives and freedom so that others may live in peace and self-respect.

The doctor gradually drifted into active politics and "willynilly, I got deeper and deeper until I could not distinguish between the struggle for expression of my people and my profession".

To see the 64-year-old relaxed in his comfortable office as he talks about South Africa-Malaysia ties may not reflect in entirety on the journey that both countries have taken to rid his nation of the scourge of

apartheid.

But then today's picture of calm at the mission, and indeed in his country, is a snapshot of journey's end when the trials and tribulations in having to battle the power of racial discrimination have been overcome.

The face of South Africa has since been wiped clean of the hated system of separate development of blacks and whites, with a new generation of people committed to a fair and equitable distribution of wealth and political power.

To hear Dr Nkomo say it, the road from apartheid to freedom has understandably been long and difficult with many pitfalls and problems along the way.

But friends like Malaysia lightened the burden of travel, providing succour to a people deprived of friends in a world that did not really want to see the link, or lack of it, between social justice and wealth.

"Malaysia supported us, foregoing the fleshpots of Eden in terms of trade and possessions, in favour of our struggle," he says, with carefully chosen words that reflect the intensity of feelings felt for Malaysia's friendship in South Africa's time of need.

At a time when few countries wanted to be openly anti-apartheid or merely undertook token exercises for fear of repercussions on their economies, Malaysia went the proverbial extra mile to look out for the nation.

As Dr Nkomo succinctly says it, "you were our friends when South Africa was a polecat (something like a skunk) of the world".

He says South Africans specially remember Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for his deep commitment towards helping fight apartheid at all international forums, "taking up the cudgels to fight for us where we could not do so ourselves".

He remembers an incident where Dr Mahathir personally passed the hat around "and collected the princely sum of RM100,000" at a function so that some black South Africans would be assured of a better life.

It is this solid bond of friendship that saw Mandela make his way to Malaysia in 1997 to thank Dr Mahathir and the country for its timely and extended support.

President Thabo Mbeki's recent visit to Malaysia was designed to build upon the bridge laid by Mandela and Dr Mahathir so that future generations of South Africans and Malaysians will enjoy the contact initiated by the leaders.

The High Commissioner, always one to simplify complex equations to their simplest level, described the visit as that of an old friend coming by to say hello.

Clearly, it was a fillip aimed at stimulating ties that currently are possibly the most solid between any African and Asian country.

Consider this: Malaysia is currently the third largest Asian investor in South Africa with very large investments in telecommunications, petroleum, human resource development and the hospitality industry.

The 1997 Asian financial crisis had put paid to any ambition to be the second largest investor.

Dr Nkomo goes further to point out that 40 per cent of Malaysia's trade with Africa is with South Africa.

"We should work together to take bilateral relations to a new dimension.

"We also have to work together to ensure that poorer countries do not become only recipients of charity but take responsibility for their own destiny."

Mbeki, in fact, stressed this point in talks with Dr Mahathir and in speeches made during his visit where he said South Africa and Malaysia had to take the lead in fostering better south-south co-operation.

His call to Malaysia to play the champion of developing nations at the recent World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting in Cancun, Mexico, was perhaps a logical continuation of the role that Malaysia has unconsciously been playing for decades.

Unfortunately, the failure of the talks has dampened this particular initiative but yet has left the door open to other areas of co-operation between both nations and developing countries.

Dr Nkomo feels that the partnership between Malaysians and the majority of South Africans engendered by their stance against apartheid can be taken a step further to a new arena of partnership in the fight for a just world economic order.

And will the good doctor remain an active player in the field of diplomacy when his term in Malaysia comes to end or will he go back to his first love?

"I am not a career diplomat. My medical practice in South Africa is no more in existence. We will have to see when my posting ends," he says with the practised ease of a diplomat.

And what is his diagnosis for the future of bilateral ties?

"Excellent," he says, not needing the comfort of additional words to describe the natural symbiosis between two nations that are leaders in their own spheres of influence.