

17/08/2003

Syrian envoy keen on closer contacts

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THE culmination of any ambassador's term in office is usually the official visit of the head of the host government - an extremely rare occurrence if indeed the timing ever coincides - to his country.

For Syrian Ambassador to Malaysia, Dr Kamal Sharaf, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's arrival today in Damascus will be all the more satisfying as it comes at the end of the envoy's three-year assignment in Kuala Lumpur.

He is not likely to ever forget this visit because of the high esteem in which he holds Dr Mahathir.

He believes that Malaysia's success story is actually the lifestory of Dr Mahathir and his achievements.

Kamal is thankful that the Prime Minister acceded to the request from Syrian President Bashar Al-Asaad to visit his country.

The invitation, according to him, was made so that Syrians could meet Dr Mahathir for a first-hand account of how Malaysia had achieved its developed nation status.

"I believe that I have accomplished what I set out to do when I came to this country three years ago. And to have the pleasure of Dr Mahathir visiting Syria is an unexpected bonus for me," the former Minister of Higher Education said in an interview recently.

"Malaysia has bucked the trend by being one of the few developing nations to succeed to such a degree that it is admired the world-over for its development.

"This can only be attributed to Dr Mahathir who has taken this country to prosperity in a very short time," he said through an interpreter, apologising for the umpteenth time for his halting English.

According to him, Dr Mahathir's success in placing Malaysia on the international holiday map went a long way in attracting 22,000 Syrian visitors to the country last year.

Syria is also Malaysia's second largest trade partner in the Middle East with the bilateral figure standing at nearly RM1 billion last year.

Malaysian exports of palm oil, wood, rubber, vegetable oils and electronic items have leapfrogged over the years while imports of raw cotton, fabrics, fuel oil and spices like the star anise have also seen an increase.

Kamal said Dr Mahathir's visit was timely in view of the numerous commonalities between the two nations in recent years, especially with regard to issues like such as peace in the Middle East and the problems faced by the Palestinians.

The avuncular 59-year-old first-time envoy is particularly happy about the consonance achieved in terms of the Iraq war where Dr Mahathir and Bashar saw the issue for what it actually was - a superpower invading a nation for its own political and economic interests.

"We have established common stands at various international forums such as the Non-Aligned Movement, Organisation of Islamic Conference and at the United Nations where we have spoken against nations of the north oppressing countries of the south through unfair political and economic practices," says the former professor of law.

It is in this respect that he wants to establish better communication links between Malaysia and Syria so that people of both nations would be mutually well-informed about developments in their respective countries.

"I feel that the Syrian national news agency, SANAA, and Bernama, its Malaysian counterpart, will sign an agreement soon on such an exchange of information."

Is a reciprocal visit by Bashar on the cards anytime in the near future?

Kamal feels "this will come" as a natural consequence of Dr Mahathir's visit though he is non-committal about when this may come about.

Syria, though never a close ally of Iraq because of a history of differences between the governments of former Syrian president Hafez Al-Asaad and deposed Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, has stood out among countries in the Middle East for its opposition to the unilateral decision of the United States to invade Iraq.

In the last days of Saddam's rule, it came into prominence for allegedly allowing the Iraqi tyrant's supporters to seek refuge across its border, a claim which it vehemently denied.

Malaysia was one of the first nations to support Syria against the American tirade, then acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi saying that the US looked as if it was artificially heating up the rhetoric against the country.

Syria is also a fierce defender of the right of the Palestinians to self-determination, a stand quite similar to that of Malaysia on the matter.

Economic terms come easily to the alumnus of the University of Moscow who supervised masters and doctorate students for several years at a university in Damascus before entering government service.

Economics, therefore, has figured prominently in his agenda which has also included improving political and cultural ties.

"The sky is the limit for economic co-operation between our countries. There is so much scope for enhancing trade. Syria can be an attractive centre for investment by Malaysian businessmen and vice-versa," he said.

According to him, incentives to attract foreign direct investment were almost identical to that of Malaysia with tax-free status and relaxation of laws involving the percentage of local participation in joint-ventures.

There appears, however, to be a problem as far as air links are concerned with no direct flights between Kuala Lumpur and Damascus.

"We are working on this with the Malaysian Ministry of Culture and Tourism. I believe there will be a positive development at the end of the year," he said.

He added that the economic and religious variables favoured a stop-over in Damascus.

A deeply-religious man whose exceptionally calm demeanour is probably reflective of his spirituality, Kamal is also a reservoir of knowledge about Islamic history in the Middle East.

He feels airlines should start thinking of a stop-over in Damascus on the KLIA-Jeddah route as the Syrian capital is home to many Islamic sites which will attract pilgrims going on the Haj and others.

"Damascus was the capital of the Islamic world at one point in history.

"It is an important place to visit for Muslims," he said.

The ambassador loves to talk about education and the potential for co-operation in this regard.

"A number of Syrian ulama have visited universities like the International Islamic University and other institutions of higher learning in Malaysia to deliver lectures."

Another area of co-operation that was recently established was an agreement between the Arab Baath Socialist Party of Syria and Umno at the latter's general assembly recently.

Kamal is particularly proud of this relationship as it promises greater political co-operation and understanding between both countries.

What are his impressions of Malaysians and the country as a whole?

"I am very comfortable in your country. What impresses me most is the way in which your standard of living has improved to almost that of most Western nations. This is a great achievement."

The ambassador and his wife return to Syria soon to rejoin his two sons who work as a computer engineer and a judge.

A third son, not surprisingly, is currently away on a posting as the second secretary at the Syrian Embassy in Belgium.

What is his next posting?

"This is my first and last posting as ambassador.

"I am going back to my academic career," he says with a smile.