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Malaysia and Petronas making inroads in land of Mocha coffee

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MALAYSIANS would have been excused for looking at their atlas when 12 Malaysian students were arrested in Yemen last year for breaching laws involving religious education.

This is not altogether surprising, given the general dearth of information on the young Arab nation which turns 13 on Thursday.

To be sure, it's best known exports so far are boxing legend "Prince" Nasim Hamid and mocha coffee named after the Red Sea port of Makha.

But Yemen is not unknown to at least 100,000 Malaysians who trace their origins to the little-known oil-rich Arab country sandwiched between Saudi Arabia and Oman.

They are descendents of Yemeni traders, with familiar surnames including Al-Habshi and Alsagoff, who were responsible for the spread of Islam to the Malay peninsula hundreds of years ago.

Not many know their influence today on Malaysian society, which some, in a lighter vein, say even "extends to foreign policy" - Foreign Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar (or Al-Bar) is from their ranks.

"There are blood connections between Yemen and Malaysia and it's almost a family relationship," he said, adding that this made his job easier.

These details, and more, are courtesy of Yemeni ambassador to Malaysia, Mohamed Taha Mustafa, who loves to regale guests with minutiae of information and anecdotes of Yemenis.

The urbane and jocular Taha uses these to heighten interest among listeners about his country.

"Many Malaysians are trying to know more about Yemen with some trying to forge partnerships with Yemenis," said the 52-year-old career diplomat. "I am happy with the extent of interest shown by Malaysians about Yemen."

For those still trying to place Yemen, part of it is the former British protectorate of Aden which served as an outpost for the colonial power in the Arab world.

When the British left in 1967, there was strife between the republican north and the marxist south for two decades until unification in 1990.

Despite the seriousness with which he describes the decades of civil unrest which saw two presidents assassinated, Taha cannot but lighten the mood with reference to his marriage "that united both north and south Yemen".

"I am from Sanaa (the capital) while my wife, Seena, is from Aden in the south. So, in a way, we managed to bring north and south together even before political reunification," he said.

Taha has played a key role in improving bilateral ties, handling the visit of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to Malaysia in 1998 shortly after presenting his credentials. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad reciprocated with a visit to Yemen in 2001.

The Prime Minister, as it turned out, had a personal experience which revealed the depth of bilateral ties.

"When Dr Mahathir was visiting Hadhramaut in the south from where many Malaysians of Yemeni descent come from, he was pleasantly surprised when several locals spoke to him in Bahasa Malaysia," he said.

"As it turned out, these were people who had lived in Malaysia and returned to Yemen for good when they grew old."

If there is anything that Taha is particularly proud of is his hand in the role that Petronas is playing in oil exploration in Yemen.

"Alhamdulillah (thanks be to God). It (Petronas' involvement) has progressed since we signed an agreement with Malaysia last year."

Petronas has also since started importing crude oil of a high quality from Yemen for refining in Malaysia.

Another feather in his cap is the air links between Kuala Lumpur and Sanaa. Yemen Airways began flying between the two capitals in January last year.

"It is doing good business. Last summer saw loads of Yemenis coming to Malaysia. The flights were always full.

"We are hoping for the same this year but we are keeping our fingers crossed because of the poor global economic situation."

It has been smooth sailing since Yemen opened its embassy in Kuala Lumpur in January 1998 with Malaysia reciprocating in September, 1999.

Taha is optimistic that the first joint committee meeting scheduled for October will be a success.

"It has been a healthy relationship so far with civil servants and diplomats from both sides exchanging visits."

The trade balance, however, is not as healthy. Between January and June last year, Malaysian exports to Yemen totalled RM173.29 million compared to imports of RM844.18 million.

Taha, who is concurrently ambassador to Thailand, is trying to get more Yemenis to invest in Malaysia along the lines of Pacific Interlink which exports palm oil to Yemen.

"There is definitely scope for Yemeni investments in Malaysia. But Yemenis are holding back because of the downturn in the world economy."

Taha is also hoping to attract Malaysian companies to invest in the Aden Free Trade Zone which is offering excellent benefits for foreign firms, including tax free status, allowances in repatriation of profits and almost full ownership.

On the education front, Taha is pushing for more Yemenis to study in Malaysia.

Thanks to him there are now 400 Yemeni students in Malaysia, a tremendous increase considering that he found only one Yemeni student in Malaysia in 1998.

At last count, there were at least 60 Malaysians studying in Yemen.

Taha says the unhappy episode involving the arrest of Malaysian students last year is a thing of the past.

"The issue has been resolved. Everything is now under control. The Government now requires all religious institutions of higher learning to be registered."

Taha is a veritable reservoir of knowledge about Yemen which shows in his almost academic explanation of the origin of Moca coffee.

Yemen, he says, is the home of the robust flavour which has been claimed by other nations as their own.

"The word 'mocha' actually comes from the name of the port of Makha from where the coffee is exported.

"It is a little known secret that one of the best coffees in the world actually comes from Yemen."

Taha, the father of four children, three of whom study at international schools in Kuala Lumpur, relishes the satisfaction that is seen on the faces of guests who are almost always served mocha and iced water.

Taha, a popular figure in diplomatic circles, also makes an impression with his prodigious memory.

He rattles off dates with ease. And when it comes to dates of particular importance in Yemeni history and of landmark events in the Malaysian-Yemeni relations, he recalls it in an instant.

But then, this is the usual stock-in-trade of the more astute diplomat

which he most certainly is.

And his impressions of Malaysia?

"I love this beautiful country. I feel at home here. We are almost Malaysians. If given a chance, I will stay here as long as I can," he says.