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Market man works to boost ties

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WHEN Juergen A.R. Staks arrived two-and-a-half years ago in his capacity as German Ambassador to Malaysia, there were about 2,000 Germans living here.

Most of them comprised those working in more than 300 German companies.

"I am happy to note the number has increased steadily over the years. In fact, there are more German companies opening regional offices in Malaysia," he said.

Among these include Deutsche Post AG, Europe's biggest postal service, and the BMW Group. Giesecke & Devrient, a German company involved in the printing of bank notes and security cards, will also be operating a printing plant in Shah Alam soon.

"Asia is an important growth market for the Deutsche Post and its logistic brand DHL, in which they want to invest substantially, while BMW plans to set up its logistic centre for the region in Johor.

"The new centre would be able to serve all BMW's needs in this region including Australia and New Zealand," he said.

He added that the enthusiasm shown by these German companies to come and invest in Malaysia stemmed from the recent visits made by the leaders of these two countries.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad led a mission to Germany in March last year and even delivered keynote addresses at business forums in Berlin and Munich.

In May this year, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's visit to Malaysia was noted as a historic event as he was the republic's first Head of Government to visit Malaysia.

Staks said the visits had convincingly managed to strengthen ties between the two countries.

"The visit by Chancellor Schroeder was made during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) out-break. Yet, I remembered him saying that even through difficult times, good relationships must be maintained.

"That is why he made the trip to Malaysia, despite the SARS outbreak," he said, adding that Schroeder's 17-member delegation included Economics and Labour Minister Wolfgang Clement and German Industry Committee for Asia-Pacific chairman Heinrich von Pierer.

The leaders, during the visits, took time to discuss bilateral topics, particularly economics and world affairs including the restructuring of post-war Iraq, effectiveness of the United Nations and the situation in the Middle East and East Asia.

"Malaysia has the infrastructure to be a regional hub in many aspects, such as in information technology, but it has not been exploited fully.

"The visits by these two leaders have somehow encouraged more participation from the business community to come and operate here and that is a good sign," he said.

Apart from business opportunities, he said Malaysia also had the potential to attract more tourists. Last year, more than 77,000 German tourists visited Malaysia.

"Malaysia is a beautiful place: the culture, the mountains and the beaches. There are many reasons to come and visit Malaysia," he said.

An avid traveller himself, he said his most memorable moment was when caught a sunrise atop Mount Kinabalu in April.

"I love to travel and explore the country. Only then can I help promote

Malaysia to my German friends as I would know of the interesting places to visit," he said.

Usually accompanied by his family, Staks has travelled to most states in Malaysia, visiting sultans and chief ministers.

"It's fun to meet the people and the leaders at these states. At least now I know the difference between residing in a kampung and a city. I usually drive when I travel so that I can witness more," he said.

But apart from promoting Malaysia to Germans, as ambassador, he also has the duty to help promote Germany to Malaysians.

"In that capacity, I have to play the role of a 'market man', attracting people to come to my country.

"I get invited to talks and forums sometimes, and that is where I speak more about Germany and share with the Malaysian audience the experiences residing and doing business in Germany," he said.

In depicting the culture of the Germans, the embassy also organises functions similar to the ones held in Germany. There are concerts, movies and exhibitions held to bring Germany closer to Malaysia.

"The October Festival (known as 'Oktoberfest'), for instance, is a yearly gathering that depicts the culture of Germans in Munich.

"The Malaysian-German Society in Penang last year celebrated the event by bringing in musicians to entertain visitors," he said.

He added that the society, established 41 years ago, was active in organising activities for its members.

"Together with the Goethe Institute, the MGS and the Malaysian-German Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the embassy organises events to bring the German community in Malaysia closer, as well as help Malaysians understand us better," he said.

Whether it's celebrating an important German festival, organising business forums and trade exhibitions, or conducting a language class, the embassy's door is always open to those who want to know more about Europe's most populated nation.

"Although I'm happy with the relationship that we have between the two countries, I will continue finding ways to improve the situation.

"Being an ambassador is an exciting occupation, and I will do my best to strengthen ties between Germans and Malaysians."