

EDITORIAL: The high road to better ties  
January 18, 2006  
New Straits Times

Jan 15: SINCE the Asian financial crisis of 1997, relations between Malaysia and Indonesia have mostly exercised the fire-fighting skills of their Governments.

From the blaze of the reformasi movement to the burning coals of illegal immigration to the smoulders of transboundary haze, Putrajaya and Jakarta were hard put to see a way forward through the smoke. As hot as it got under the collar, cordial ties were strenuously maintained, if not at the popular level then at the stratum of businessmen, high officials and senior politicians. Above them, the personal rapport between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was the best guarantee that hands would continue to be stretched across the sometimes choppy waters separating the two neighbours.

Those hands, however, remain too few and, in Indonesia especially, too subject to the whims of domestic politics. The meeting between Abdullah and Susilo in Bukit Tinggi in the highlands of west Sumatra on Thursday thus strove to take bilateral co-operation beyond the two leaders' obvious regard for one another. Both headed sizable delegations, the better to allow their friendship to percolate to the subordinates in charge of the day-to-day enterprise of bringing the two nations closer together. "Networking" in the details of a broad agenda is indeed the first step in preventing the entire relationship from being defined by singular issues. As with the Abdullah administration's initiative on Singapore, social interaction — even a golf game — is often enough to accentuate the positive.

There was plenty of that in Bukit Tinggi. Susilo affirmed that territorial disputes would continue to be talked over and cross-border frictions such as illegal logging, human trafficking and smuggling would get the attention they deserve. He also said that Indonesia would do more to douse the haze — the miasma that lowers the image of the country in the stinging eyes of Malaysians with each dry season. Unlike his predecessors, there is no reason to doubt Susilo. It was he, after all, who increased fuel prices last year — a feat of political will that former president Megawati Sukarnoputri had quailed from and that had cost Suharto his presidency when he finally acted to save his country at the outbreak of the 1997 disaster. After 15 months in office, Susilo has not only proved that he means business but that he leads a reforming economy that Malaysia can do business with.

Economic partnership holds the key to leaving the past behind, as the Malaysian delegation was keen to impress in Bukit Tinggi. Here, however, apart from Susilo's zeal, the picture is not as clear than it should be. Indonesia remains unfriendly to foreign investors, tying them up in yards of red tape and holding them captive to over-active unions and restrictive labour laws. The good news is that the economy is finally being put right, with better balanced budgets, a greater commitment to reduce corruption and the announcement of a new policy team last month. If Susilo succeeds, there will be more on the table of future bilateral meetings than the famished menu of crisis management.

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