

45 years on, much room for growth in Cuba-Malaysia ties -- Ambassador

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By R.Ravichandran



Ibeté Fernández Hernández

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 6 -- Although the year 2020 marks the 45th year of diplomatic relations between Cuba and Malaysia, there are many potential which remain unexplored, said Cuban Ambassador to Malaysia Ibeté Fernández Hernández.

She added that with bilateral trade volume amounting to US\$11 million in the past two years, the updated Cuban economic model offers countless possibilities for trade and cooperation to entrepreneurs in both Cuba and Malaysia.

"As far away as 1995, Tun Daim Zainuddin, then an economic advisor to the government, travelled to Cuba and after what he witnessed, he called on Malaysian entrepreneurs to travel to the island and to document business and investment opportunities. 25 years have passed," she said in a message to Bernama in conjunction with the 45th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between Cuba and Malaysia, today.

"Amid the so-called 'Cold War', the membership of Cuba and Malaysia to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), based on the principles of maintaining national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and the security of its members, united the two countries," she added.

Cuba and Malaysia established diplomatic ties in 1975 – at the time of the Cold War ideological divide – and since then have moved forward to enjoy meaningful relations and cooperation in many areas – politics, economics, medical, education, biotechnology, sports and people-to-people relations.

Cuba opened its embassy in Kuala Lumpur in 1997, and Malaysia followed suit by setting up its embassy in Havana in February 2001.

Hernandez said in 1997 Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad – during his first stint as Prime Minister – made an official visit to Cuba, upon the invitation of the late Cuban President Fidel Castro, which she described as marking a new phase in the bilateral relations.

"At that time, at the will of both governments, important agreements of economic and technical cooperation were signed and also to promote the people-to-people ties," she said.

Hernandez noted that Cuba had the privilege of receiving Dr Mahathir again in 2000 and in 2008, and Fidel Castro visited Malaysia in 2001 and then 2003 for the (13th) NAM Summit, under the Malaysian chairmanship.

The exchanges of high-level delegations by First Vice President Raúl Castro Ruz in 2005, former Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2006), Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla (2010) and Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Anifah Aman in 2015 further nourished the links in the sector of education, health, biotechnology, sports and culture, Hernandez said.

Despite the hardship caused by the imposition of blockade by the United States, Cuba managed to train thousands of doctors from many countries – including Malaysia.

In this context, Hernandez further said that within the framework of the established cooperation, Cuba had the privilege of training about 30 Malaysian youths as doctors.

For its part, Hernandez pointed out that Malaysia has received – and continues to receive – Cuban specialists and officials in the framework of the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP).

One notable area of cooperation which still has many potentials to grow is biotechnology, a field where Cuba possesses tremendous expertise following its big investment in the Research and Development (R&D) in biotechnology and where the country has reached important milestone.

"In the biotechnology sector, the company Bioven de Malaysia and CIMAB S.A de Cuba, collaborate in clinical trials for the CIMAVAX EGF vaccine against lung cancer. On the other hand, the Agro Supplies company obtained the registration of the Cuban

biolarvicide Bactivec for the control of mosquito larvae, produced by the Cuban company LABIOFAM," she explained.

She said Malaysia also imported Cuban vaccines against hepatitis B through the private company, DNA Biosciences.

In any relations between two countries, strong people-to-people ties are very important, and Hernandez said that the exchanges had been fruitful all these years.

She said as a result, in 2005, the Association of Friendship with Cuba (FOCA) was established, with the aim of promoting Cuban culture and business that continues to be a reference for those interested in knowing more about Cuba.

"With the work of the organisation and the support of the embassy in Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian public has been able to appreciate part of Cuba's cultural heritage through music, dances, visual arts and also the tasting of excellent Habanos," she said.

The Cuban ambassador does not see the distance between Malaysia and Cuba as an impediment to tourism, as Malaysian tourists are increasingly traveling to Cuba and "we expect the number to increase in the future".

Hernandez also acknowledged Malaysia's solidarity with Cuba all these years against the blockade.

She said Cuba appreciates the accompaniment of Malaysia in the fight against the blockade and that both countries share similar views at multilateral forums on a need for a fairer world, and respect for the principles of international law and the United Nations Charter.

Malaysia had been giving overwhelming support to Cuban resolutions to end the US-imposed embargo on the island nation at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), since 1992.

The Cuban economy was losing some US\$12 million daily due to the United States blockade imposed since 1960.

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