



Much can be done to further deepen ties with Singapore, says new Malaysian envoy

SINGAPORE, Sept 1 -- Much can be done in the post COVID-19 period to further deepen the deep-rooted Singapore-Malaysia bilateral relations, says Malaysia's newly appointed High Commissioner to Singapore Datuk Dr Azfar Mohamad Mustafar.

He notes that the bilateral relations with Malaysia's immediate southern neighbour is very comprehensive and covers the whole economic, social, and cultural spectrum.

Azfar also foresees trade and tourism between both sides recovering when the COVID-19 threat diminishes as the vaccination drive progresses at both sides of the Causeway.

In terms of trade, he acknowledges that the numbers have been low now but the flow of goods and supplies never stopped during the pandemic.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, main exports to Singapore in the second quarter of 2021 were electrical and electronics (E&E), as well as petroleum and rubber-based products.

"Tourism has been affected right now but not only between Malaysia and Singapore but all over the world," he said.

Malaysia's 2020 international tourist arrivals plunged to 4.33 million individuals from 26.1 million persons a year earlier, of which the first among the top international tourist arrivals to Malaysia were from Singapore with 1.55 million people.

Touching on the pending bilateral issues such as airspace and maritime, Azfar points out that discussions have been ongoing at the working group level amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Discussions on airspace and maritime issues continue but through virtual platforms because of the strict measures due to COVID-19 .

"But, discussing sensitive and important issues like airspace and maritime via virtual platforms will not be the same as physical meetings.

"So we look forward to the opening of the border so that relevant agencies can continue their discussions on these issues."

"During COVID-19 pandemic the focus is on health matters and also addressing COVID issues... most of it involves consular advice... the fact that many Malaysians are stranded here," he said.

Asked on how he deals with questions from the diplomatic community here relating to the dynamic political developments back home, Azfar said politicians in Malaysia were mature enough to put the interests of the country above everything else.

"Singapore is our closest neighbour and an important partner for trade and economy. Any political development in Malaysia will be of interest to the Singapore government, its people and of course diplomats in Singapore.

"I see it as a sign of maturing democracy in Malaysia. Change in government has been done following the element of the constitution. So it is not something that is being done illegally," he said.

Azfar said Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had a phone conversation with his new Malaysian counterpart Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob during which Lee congratulated Ismail Sabri and invited him over for an official visit to Singapore.

"While many parties in Singapore follow closely and maybe some of them are concerned with the developments in Malaysia, but as far as we are concerned we are in a good position," he said.

Azfar, the 17th Malaysian High Commissioner to Singapore handed over his credential to Singapore President Halimah Yacob on Tuesday (Aug 31) at the Istana.

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