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MALAYSIA-UKRAINE: FAIR AND SQUARE PARTNERSHIP

– *This year marks the fifteenth anniversary of the establishment of the Embassy of Malaysia in Kyiv. What are the most remarkable achievements in bilateral relations over these years in general, and during your tenure in particular? What are the current priorities of the Embassy? What are the most promising areas of cooperation between our countries?*

– As you have rightly mentioned, Malaysia established its diplomatic mission in Kyiv 15 years ago, on 27 September 2004. Naturally, Malaysia-Ukraine relations have evolved since then in keeping with the strategic interests of both countries. In the early phase of our bilateral ties, interwovention – owing it to the sizeable number of Malaysians studying in Ukraine.

Although education continues to be one of priority areas for the Embassy of Malaysia, nowadays, we have reoriented it towards promoting Malaysia as an education hub for international students, including from Ukraine. Malaysia is ranked as the world's 11th most preferred study destination for international students by UNESCO. The factors that attract international students to study in Malaysia include quality education whereby the study programmes offered are internationally recognised; affordable tuition fees; reasonable cost of living; and safe and stable environment. Education options in Malaysia include public and private higher education institutions, foreign university branch campuses, skills training centers and language schools.

I realise that Ukrainian students often look to pursue their tertiary education within the traditional destinations in Europe, the United States and Canada. At present, there are only seven Ukrainian students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions. However, with various factors around the world today, including a challenging global economy and changes in geopolitical trends in the United States and Europe, we hope to encourage more students from Ukraine to choose Malaysia as the destination to further their tertiary education.

In addition, the Embassy is placing more emphasis on promoting tourism. That was upon recognising Ukraine as a potential market in terms of tourist arrivals due to its growing middle class which means more Ukrainians could afford to travel abroad. Visa free travel to Malaysia for Ukrainians is the main factor that has drawn Ukrainians to choose Malaysia as their holiday destination. Besides that, Ukraini-

ans are attracted to Malaysia's white sandy beaches and excellent connectivity that enables smooth travels to other countries in the region. Our efforts over the years have borne fruits wherein tourist arrivals from Ukraine have increased more than twofold as compared to five years ago in 2012 with just 5,606 arrivals.

I must say witnessing the strengthening of bilateral relations between Malaysia and Ukraine has been the most noteworthy achievement during my tenure thus far. This was manifested by the uptick in exchanges of visits including the visit by Malaysia's Minister of Human Resources to Ukraine in November 2018; upward trend in bilateral trade in 2017 and 2018; newly established cooperative endeavour in reference to halal certification collaboration between the Islamic Development of Malaysia (JAKIM) and Ukraine's Certification Center 'Halal'; and Ukraine being accepted as a Recipient Country of Malaysia's Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP).

Based on the positive events I have mentioned, I can sum up that the most promising areas for further development of cooperation between Malaysia and Ukraine are trade, tourism, education and capacity building.

– It has been almost five years since the downing of MH17. Malaysia lost 43 citizens to this disaster. In 2016, the Joint Investigative Team, comprising authorities from Australia, Belgium, Malaysia, the Netherlands, and Ukraine, determined that MH17 was shot down from separatist-held territory in the Donetsk region by a Buk anti-aircraft system provided by the Russian military. In 2018, the JIT concluded that the Buk that shot down MH17 came from the 53rd Antiaircraft Missile Brigade based in Kursk in Russia. However, the Russian Federation still denies any responsibility for the downing of flight MH17. Moreover, it has been conducting a campaign of misinformation seeking to discredit the legitimacy of the Joint Investigative Team. According to Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne, the negotiations with Russia towards 'establishing truth, achieving justice, and holding perpetrators to account' began in March this year. In your opinion, will it be possible to bring Russia to justice in the end?

– Foremost, I want to emphasise that Malaysia's overriding aim is to ensure that justice is served. Malaysia, as one of the member country of the Joint Investigation Team (JIT), remains fully committed to the JIT efforts to find and prosecute the perpetrators of this inhuman act.

As the criminal investigation is ongoing, Malaysia hopes that all concerned parties would continue to focus on ensuring the exhaustiveness of the investigation process so that our ultimate goal could eventually be achieved. Thus far, we have been pleased with the Dutch-led JIT investigation and have confidence in the Dutch legal system to try the perpetrators upon the conclusion of the criminal investigation.

– Ukraine became a recipient country of the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme in 2018. What projects have already been launched in the framework of this initiative?

– Since the beginning of 2019, we have offered many courses in wide-ranging areas under the ambit of the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP). MTCP is our international cooperation programme that provides training and technical advice in core areas for developing countries. Among them, courses in diplomacy and crisis management, physical infrastructure, anti-corruption, power plant and solar power system as well as customs. I am happy to note that the response from Ukraine has been very encouraging and the selection of Ukrainian applicants speaks to the quality of professionalism and knowledge amongst Ukrainian public officials.

– *In February 2018, Datuk Wan Latiff Wan Musa, then deputy chief executive of the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (Matrade), said that Malaysia and Ukraine have to ramp up trade promotional activities in order to boost bilateral trade. Since Malaysian companies are not familiar with Ukrainian companies and vice versa, a number of business fora, trade missions and exhibitions were organized over the last year. To what extent have these measures been successful?*

– Malaysia–Ukraine bilateral trade has been on the rise for the past 2 years after a period of stagnation. Malaysia’s trade with Ukraine grew by 25.8 per cent between 2016 and 2017, and by 23.9 per cent between 2017 and 2018. In 2018, total trade between Malaysia and Ukraine was valued at USD263.48 million, of which exports from Malaysia were worth RM121.39 million and imports into Malaysia were worth RM143.51 million. Ukraine had registered a trade surplus of RM 20.70 against Malaysia during the period.

The accelerated trade growth between Malaysia and Ukraine is partly due to Malaysian and Ukrainian government led initiatives, which had encouraged both Malaysian and Ukrainian businesses to reconnect and explore partnership opportunities.

Notable business and trade activities conducted include a Seminar titled ‘Prospering Trade between Malaysia and Ukraine’ followed by business-to-business meetings that was organised in Kuala Lumpur in January 2018, in cooperation with the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE). 19 Ukrainian companies and trade associations participated in the seminar. This was followed by the Export Acceleration Mission (EAM) to Ukraine in June 2018, led by Datuk Wan Latiff Wan Musa as you pointed out. A total of five Malaysian companies participated in the EAM and they had engaged in over 20 one-on-one business meetings with Ukrainian business partners. As a result, USD10.22 million worth of sales were generated in the sectors of food and beverage as well as medical devices and equipment, among others.

Recently in April 2019, nine Ukrainian companies participated in the International Sourcing Programme (INSP) organized by MATRADE in conjunction with the 16th Malaysia International Halal Showcase in Kuala Lumpur. Ukraine’s participation had generated USD 390,000 in sales, with more businesses under negotiation.

On the whole, two-way trade interest between Malaysia and Ukraine has gained traction with potential for continued momentum. MATRADE Office in Ukraine (MATRADE Kyiv) which is based out of our Embassy plays a main role in facilitating the introductions between Ukrainian companies seeking for sourcing partners in Malaysia. MATRADE Kyiv is also able to assist Ukrainian companies to verify the authenticity of Malaysian partners.

– *Starting from January 2019, Ukraine’s Halal Certificate is fully recognized in Malaysia. This decision by the Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia will undoubtedly open new horizons for Ukrainian food exporters. To your mind, what are further perspectives for the development of bilateral cooperation in the field of agriculture?*

– I am confident that the approval of the Halal Certification Center LLC as the first recognised Foreign Halal Certification Body in Ukraine by the Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (JAKIM) will pave the way for expansion of products being traded between Ukraine and Malaysia which is a predominantly Muslim country. Besides, given that Malaysia’s halal certification is globally recognised, halal food products from Ukraine can now have market access to other international markets too.

According to the data of Malaysia’s major imports from Ukraine, vegetable oils such as sunflower oil and rape seed oil as well as grains and pulses topped the list of Ukrainian agricultural products that are highly in demand. Beginning 2018, Ukrainian fruits namely apples and berries have also made inroads into the Malaysian market. Vice versa, we also hope that Malaysian tropical fruits such as Carambola (starfruit), mangosteen, jackfruit and pineapple will one day be able to penetrate the Ukrainian market.

Having said that, I have to caution against any discriminatory measures that will hamper Ukraine’s economic cooperation with Malaysia particularly in the agriculture field. I am referring to the proposed legislation to ban the use of palm oil in food products in Ukraine under the pretext that it is hazardous to the human’s health.

I want to clarify that Malaysia produces its palm oil under strict regulations, both locally and internationally. In that regard, Codex Alimentarius of the World Health Organization (WHO) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have prescribed palm oil as one of the oils and fats suitable and certified for human consumption. As a result of such adherence to international norms and standards, we do not know of any other country that legislates against the use of palm oil and its products in foods.

Malaysia is seriously concerned with Ukraine’s move to specifically single out palm oil which we deem as discriminatory and unjustified, especially taking into account that the proposed legislation was not backed by sound scientific principles. Any attempt to discriminate palm oil, which is the largest export item from Malaysia to Ukraine, without a doubt will negatively impact bilat-

eral trade our two countries. It will also undermine the values namely fairness and trust that have underpinned Malaysia-Ukraine ties as friends in diplomacy, trade and security.

– Just a few months ago, at the meeting with the Deputy Minister of Defence of Ukraine, you noted that Malaysia is committed to actively cooperating with Ukraine in the military sphere. A joint commission on defence cooperation should be established to that end. What progress has already been made in this direction?

– Despite the signing of the MoU on Defence Cooperation between Malaysia and Ukraine in 2007, there have been minimal activities conducted between both countries. Malaysia is of the view that the bilateral defence cooperation could be strengthened with the establishment of a Joint Committee which is provided for under the existing MoU. Through this Joint Committee, Malaysia and Ukraine would be able to monitor, manage and implement the MoU effectively.

To this end, Ministry of Defence Malaysia is still deliberating this matter with the Malaysian Armed Forces for possible area of engagements and will further discuss the proposal with the Ukrainian side. I do hope that with the establishment of such joint committee, more interactions in the field of defence industry and military cooperation could be further strengthened.

– On 9 May 2018, an unprecedented change of government took place in Malaysia. You have once noted that this event resulted in the formation of ‘New Malaysia’. There is also a widely held view that the 2014 Euromaidan revolution, also known as the Revolution of Dignity, gave birth to ‘New Ukraine’. In your opinion, are there some similarities in the recent history of our two nations?

– As a country that upholds the principles of democracy, the supremacy of the Constitution and the rule of law, the 14th General Elections did leave a profound and indelible mark in Malaysia’s history. And to a certain extent, I do see the similarities between the events that led to the birth of ‘New Malaysia’ and ‘New Ukraine’ wherein both were propelled by the people’s demands for reforms of their respective nations and their aspiration to have a government that fights corruption, restore the rule of law and rebuild institutions.

However, unlike in Ukraine where street protests, albeit in pursuit of democratic reforms and political changes, have become embedded in the country’s political culture resulting in two Revolutions in the past, Malaysians understand that while they have a voice in shaping the government they want, the only way to make their voices heard is to cast their ballots on Election Day. This was what happened on 9 May 2018. The results of the elections manifested the choice of the Malaysian people of which had led to the first change of government in 61 years. It was certainly a testament that Malaysians have the courage to vote for change. Moreover, we are extremely fortunate and proud that the consequent transition of power occurred peacefully and orderly without violence and bloodshed. It speaks volume of Malaysia’s maturing democracy whereby all parties respect and able to accept the will of the people.