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Myanmar Independence Day

More than half a century of cooperation

Bilateral relations between Myanmar and Singapore have grown from strength to strength for the two regional partners, Myanmar's ambassador to Singapore tells Geraldine Yeo

SINGAPORE is not a stranger to the people of Myanmar, who regard the Republic as a close and valued friend and partner in the region. This was how Myanmar ambassador to Singapore, U Hla Thann, described the closeness of ties between the two Asean member countries.

Bilateral relations date back to over 50 years ago when both countries started diplomatic relations with the establishment of the Myanmar Consul Office on Sept 4, 1952, later elevated to embassy level in 1994.

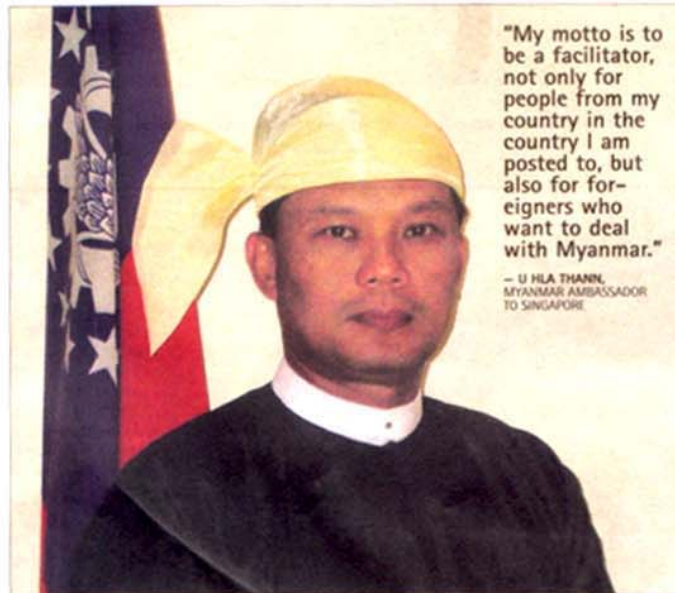
When Myanmar opened up to foreign investors in 1989, Singapore was the first to come knocking. It was the top investor and still remains the number one trade partner through normal trade with Myanmar.

To further increase cooperation at all levels, both countries established the Singapore-Myanmar Joint Ministerial Working Committee meeting in 1996.

Under the Technical Cooperation Programme, the Singapore Government set up a training centre in Yangon to train government officials and people from the private sector. There are also regular student exchange programmes offered by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, and Singapore International Foundation.

U Hla Thann hopes to foster even closer cooperation in the near future based on the "very warm and friendly longstanding relationship" between the two countries.

So far, Singapore businessmen have been involved in manufacturing, fisheries and the hotel business in Myanmar. The ambassador pointed out that Singaporeans can explore Myanmar's untapped natural resources in areas such as mining, fisheries,



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MYANMAR AMBASSADOR
TO SINGAPORE

forestry and agriculture. There are also opportunities in oil and natural gas, deep sea port and tourism projects.

"Singapore companies have great advantage to diversify their investments in these various sectors," he said.

He also suggested that Singapore businessmen could transfer technology and capital to create joint ventures with Myanmar enterprises, tapping Myanmar's highly literate manpower to venture into neighbouring China and India.

Currently, trade volume between the two countries amounts to \$1 billion. Singapore imports agricultural products such as beans and pulses, timber, textiles, prawns and shrimps, while exporting diesel fuel, machinery parts, milk and cream to Myanmar.

U Hla Thann said: "My motto is to be a facilitator, not only for people from my country in the country I am posted to, but also for foreigners who want to deal with Myanmar. I'm here and I will facilitate anyone interested in Myanmar according to their needs."

In line with this personal

principle, he has set about building more cohesion and cooperation among the 30,000-strong community of Myanmar people in Singapore. Many are working here as doctors, engineers, geologists, accountants, nurses, sailors and construction workers.

"If you go to a football match like the Tiger Cup semi-final between our two countries, it will feel like we're back home," the ambassador, himself an ardent football fan and avid golfer, said with a smile.

During his four years here as ambassador, he started the Myanmar Club in 2001 as a social avenue for his people living and working here, and to encourage the promotion of their country's unique culture. He also established the Myanmar Business Association in 2002, a networking and support platform for his fellow countrymen engaged in various trades.

He added that Singapore is a convenient business gateway for Myanmar businesses to the South-east Asian region, given that both countries base their legal system on the British Common Law.

The ambassador said: "Singapore has a well-established business community. What Myanmar has is a 20-million-strong, easy-to-train workforce and all kinds of natural resources that are untapped. If our two countries can work more together, it will be beneficial for all."

He noted that there are about 5,000 students from Myanmar studying in Singapore's polytechnics and universities.

"They will have an understanding of Singapore's business environment as well as links to their home country. They can act as natural links and bridges for Singapore companies to venture

into and partner businesses in Myanmar," he said.

On the political front, the ambassador said that Myanmar is moving towards transforming itself into a modern democratic nation. On Aug 30, 2003, a collective decision of the State Peace and Development Council was formalised in a seven-step roadmap to democratisation.

A crucial step of the process was The National Convention, the first session of which was held on May 17 to July 9, 2004. There was a 96 per cent attendance, or 1,088 delegates. The absentees were the National League for Democracy (NLD) and its allies despite being invited to attend to participate in the process of building the nation, the ambassador said.

He added: "The country is enjoying unprecedented peace and stability and is moving forward. It poses no threat to its neighbours. On the contrary, it is cooperating with the countries in the region to promote peace and stability, and to establish a prosperous community of nations."

A former military man and the eldest of five children to farmers, the ambassador is keen to see his country given a chance in the world economy. His passion for his homeland and people is obvious: "This is the country I grew up in. This is the country I will die in. This is the people that I love. No matter where Myanmar people go, they will always go back home, because they find there is no better place than Myanmar."

"I hope Singaporeans will go and see more of my country—and love it as much as we do."

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