
SINGAPORE, ARMENIA TIES GO BACK LONG WAY: PM LEE

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Ties between Armenia and Singapore go back 200 years to when the British founded modern Singapore, with Armenians among the first migrants to the new free port, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday.

Although their numbers were small, the Armenian community has made a significant impact here, he added.

He was speaking at a lunch hosted in honour of his Armenian counterpart Nikol Pashinyan, who is here on a three-day official visit.

"Signs of Armenian influence can still be found all over Singapore," PM Lee said. "As a former journalist who founded his own newspaper, PM Pashinyan would undoubtedly be pleased to know that Singapore's main English broadsheet, The Straits Times, was co-founded in 1845 by an Armenian, Catchick Moses."

Several streets also bear the names of prominent Armenians who settled here, while the country's national flower - Vanda Miss Joaquim - was bred by Singapore-born Armenian resident Agnes Joaquim, who died in 1899.

Speaking in Armenian, Mr Pashinyan warmly expressed his appreciation of how the Armenian heritage has been "remembered and protected with the utmost care" in Singapore.

"No doubt, today we are proud to witness the valuable mark our small but enterprising community has left in one of the most wonderful places of the world," he said.

He added that he hoped to usher in a "new opening" of relations between both countries, especially to boost the growth of bilateral trade and investment.

"Rule of law has been strengthened, and a level playing field has been set for all economic players, in particular for the foreign investors," he said, adding that Armenia has overcome many problems faced by countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. "Corruption has decreased sharply and is not considered a factor threatening economic activity anymore."

Armenia and Singapore are alike in that they advocate multilateralism and free trade at a time

when many are turning against these principles, PM Lee said.

He noted that Singapore is negotiating a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which Armenia is chairing this year.

"The FTA will catalyse more business and stronger economic relations between our regions," Mr Lee said, adding that he appreciates Armenia's strong support for the agreement.

"I am heartened by the substantial progress made and hope that we will be able to conclude the FTA, especially the goods chapter, soon."

Yesterday, both countries signed five agreements to cooperate in areas such as tourism, taxation, arts and culture, vocational training and plant exchange.

Armenia is one of five member states of the EAEU, which also includes Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. The economic bloc represents a market of more than 180 million people with a combined gross domestic product of US\$1.8 trillion (S\$2.5 trillion).

Mr Pashinyan, who arrived on Sunday, received an official welcome at the Istana yesterday morning. He also paid a courtesy call on President Halimah Yacob.

Yesterday afternoon, he and his delegation met business leaders at a round-table session organised by the Singapore Business Federation.

Said its chief executive Ho Meng Kit: "For many of us present today, Eurasia is an emerging region that some Singapore businesses have begun exploring for opportunities."

Mr Pashinyan will visit the Economic Development Board and Botanic Gardens, where an orchid will be named in his honour. He will also call on Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin.

The Armenian PM is accompanied by his wife, Madam Anna Hakobyan, as well as Minister of Economy Tigran Khachatryan, Minister of High-Technological Industry Hakob Arshakyan, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Avet Adonts and senior government officials.

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