

A beacon for growth and stability

With its wealth of energy resources, business-friendly nation offers warm welcome

With a strategic position close to South American markets, and as a potential hub for shipping and trade, Trinidad and Tobago, T&T for short, is reinforcing bilateral links with China.

An official visit from Chinese President Xi Jinping to the Caribbean archipelago in June last year, and T&T Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar's official visit to China this week are heralding the dawn of a strong and mutually beneficial partnership between the two nations.

On Feb 26, Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar will be opening the new Trinidad & Tobago Embassy in Beijing.

Her visit also coincides with the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

During Xi's first visit to the country, he and T&T Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar agreed to enhance diplomatic exchanges and high-level visits; to actively promote cooperation in the fields of infrastructure, energy and mining, and to explore further cooperation in agriculture, fisheries, science and technology, investment and financing, telecommunications and new energy; to expand people-to-people exchanges, strengthen exchanges and cooperation in the fields of tourism and culture, especially creative industries, education, health, sports, journalism

and personnel training, to support youth exchanges and set up a Confucius Institute in T&T at an early date; and to keep close cooperation on international affairs.

China will give positive consideration for providing energy-saving products to relevant Caribbean countries to help them enhance their abilities to adapt to and cope with the effects of climate change.

China already has a big presence in Trinidad in terms of oil exploration, through Sinopec and China National Offshore Oil Corporation, and this will increase with the expansion of the Panama Canal, which will allow easier exports of liquefied natural gas toward Asia. T&T received its highest ever foreign direct investment of \$2.5 billion in 2012, 90 percent of which was in the energy sector. China has also donated \$3.1 billion in concessional loans to the Caribbean Community countries, which has delighted the T&T Prime Minister, who will represent the CARICOM community when he visits Beijing for the embassy opening.

"I know our delegation is very happy to visit China and we again want to thank His Excellency and the people of China for visiting us. In fact, the president met with most of the heads of CARICOM for a very gracious concessional financing during his visit in June. We have made applications and there are several projects here that are being undertaken by Chinese firms."

Although T&T has been an oil and



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KAMLA PERSAD-BISSESSAR
PRIME MINISTER OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

gas economy for over 100 years — the sector makes up 40 percent of GDP and 80 percent of exports — the government has launched a diversification drive which aims to create a more balanced economy.

As T&T Finance Minister Larry Howai explained: "Our financial services sector has been one of the most dynamic and aggressive in the non-energy sectors. It has also been a very innovative sector, pioneering in services like mobile and internet banking among others, as well as corporate banking. I expect they will continue to make a very positive and strong contribution to growth over



The Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago Kamla Persad-Bissessar with Xi Jinping, the president of China.

the next few years.

"We have also been introducing new legislation that would have some tighter regulation of the industry and have been looking at a number of new initiatives. I think all of these will add to the dynamism of the sector."

T&T is also making great strides to develop its infrastructure. With around 700,000 cars to a population of 1.25 million people, congestion can be a problem.

As the country's primary construction management agency, the National Infrastructure Development Company, NIDCO for short, has played a key role in creating jobs and stimulating the national econ-

omy. The company supports government's plans for diversifying the economy away from the traditional energy sector.

According to NIDCO President, Dr. Carson Charles, "Diversification requires a complete re-thinking of the entire economic system, to achieve the level of productivity, and competitiveness required for long-term growth and development. However, oil and gas cannot be replaced by any one product or sector."

"A modern physical infrastructure platform is key to achieving economic transformation. We are currently building several highways to link the major economic centres in

the country. We are also constructing infrastructure to deal with the perennial problems of flooding, erosion and land slippage," he added.

NIDCO undertakes major roads and bridges construction, transportation management, flood alleviation projects and management of the water taxi service. It regularly works with international companies and consultants on its projects.

"We recruit the best people available for project management and have formed a number of joint ventures with foreign companies and consultancies."

InFocus provided the story

Tobago looks to become a 'must-see' destination

Small but perfectly formed, Trinidad's beautiful island neighbor upgrades with help from China

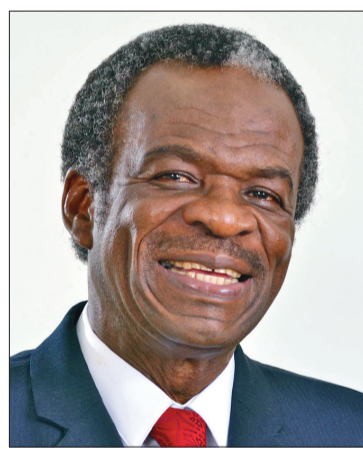
A true Caribbean paradise spanning just 116 square miles, Tobago is a diverse island of strong potential. With lush rainforests, a serene landscape, a stunning coral reef, pristine beaches and a luxury resort and golf course, this home to 60,000 people offers a diverse range of activities for tourists, as well as numerous opportunities for savvy investors.

The Tobago House of Assembly, THA for short, is forward looking and supportive to both businesses and the environment. Infrastructure is excellent by Caribbean standards — the island's ANR Robinson Airport is currently in the midst of an upgrade and enjoys direct flights from Delta, BA and Virgin airlines, among others — and is only a \$50, 25 minute trip from Port of Spain, Trinidad to Tobago.

With Trinidad's energy economy as backup, Tobago's representatives can afford to be selective as far as tourism development projects are concerned, while enjoying the advantages an affordable and reliable energy supply brings to Tobago's competitiveness.

As he discussed the Tobago Economic Development Plan 2013-2017 — a new agenda for change and diversification — Chief Secretary Orville London highlighted the new projects that would be attractive for Chinese visitors.

"Tobago is now in a position where it can maximize its proximity to the gas and energy resources of the country," he said. "We have the gas pipeline coming from the BHP Billiton field and a 64-megawatt power plant at the Cove Eco-Industrial and Business Park, CEIBP for short. It is a small area and there are openings for pharmaceuticals, agroprocessing, some downstream activities, as well as information technology. We have had interest



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ORVILLE LONDON
CHIEF SECRETARY, THA

from China and the CEIBP board of directors is now exploring some of these possibilities."

Also among Tobago's advantages is its strategic location at the gateway to the Americas — it lies just 50 miles from the Venezuelan coast — a highly literate population and a stable political environment.

"We want to get away from our almost total dependence on tourism," London says, adding that as the THA is also looking to strengthen its traditional sectors of agriculture and fishing.

"When I visited China some years ago, one of the things that impressed me was the number of small-scale operations set up on sometimes

challenging terrain that weren't ultra sophisticated but that got the job done in a way that makes the product competitive. We also need to look at the specialization in the type of produce."

Creating brand loyalty

When it comes to tourism, however, London is adamant Tobago will never go the way of other destinations that end up destroying the very product that attracted visitors in the first place.

"Sometimes you have pristine, attractive, and natural places being transformed into mini-Miamis as they cater to other visitors," he said. "We are a market leader because we started late and moved slowly. That has been a deliberate policy and I hope that visitors notice that even if it is a tourist island, you still get the feeling you are living in an authentic place where you feel comfortable."

"Within 116 square miles, you get the sun, sea and sand aspect but then you also have the north-east which is more rustic and earthy."

"We have diving to rival any other site in the world at Speyside and niche activities such as bird watching, as well as a varied cultural heritage. I think we can provide the discerning visitor with a unique experience and of course, when you link that to a fairly extensive infrastructure, it makes for an interesting package. In 20 years, you will find more or less the same product."

The idea of Tobago staying the same is something London is keen to build on and "sell" to investors.

"In an environment that is dynamic and competitive and so on, we are looking at brand loyalty; the type of loyalty that is based on a predictable product. We buy Coca-Cola and KFC because we are loyal to their brand. In tourism, however,



Pigeon Point beach and dyke.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

things change and become unfashionable," he said.

Within the Diversification Program, the THA earmarked designated development areas: one of which was looking at how to be more attractive to businesses.

"We are now working with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Tourism and Trade to ensure that there can be an easy flow of business, where the bureaucratic hurdles are eliminated and where you bring predictability to the whole process. We want to get to a stage where a prospective investor can see a time frame and see the constraints and unpredictability."

A 40-year milestone

Next year marks the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relationship between Trinidad and Tobago and China. The occasion will be marked with the opening of a new Trinidad and Tobago embassy in Beijing and shows a higher level of relations between the two countries.

London explained the characteristics that distinguish Tobago as an excellent business partner.

"We have been very fortunate in our relationship with the Chinese embassy and had a better than excellent relationship with them. The previous ambassador, Yan Youming, genuinely loved the island and we hope the current ambassador Huang Xingyuan to be just as enthusiastic."

"However, we know that there is a constraint with respect to distance and of course, competition along the way. You just need a minuscule percentage of the people who travel out of China to make it viable. There is a ready market in the Chinese population in the US for example, so the question of airlift and language has already been resolved. There is a respect for the Chinese, their culture, their way of life, and most importantly, their people, their focus, their self-reliance and their industriousness. There have been some mutually beneficial relationships between Tobago and the Chinese, which have benefited both sides."

With China's help, Tobago hopes to use tourism as a vehicle for rebranding, as part of an effort to become a must-see destination.

"We are starting to see some positive action on this front; the Chinese ambassador has indicated there are programs available to us in China, especially countries that are not considered highly developed countries, which is one avenue that we can explore."

"There are stories there that are applicable to the Tobago context. Some of the things they have done have been performed quite well and I believe some of the stories of Chinese success should be told here in Tobago."

InFocus provided the story



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