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New beginning for Mindanao

Opening of the Chinese consulate general in the southern Philippine island reflects growing bilateral ties

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Li Lin, China's first consul general to Davao, is a strong believer in the future of Mindanao.

Taking up his post in March, he believes the southern Philippine island — rich in agriculture, fisheries and tourist resources — is headed for a bright future.

Speaking to *China Daily*, Li said the conflicts of the past are fading away as Mindanao welcomes a new beginning.

Li said the importance of Mindanao was best summed up by China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in his opening speech when the Chinese consulate general was officially inaugurated on Oct 28.

"Setting up a consulate general in Davao reflects the deepening friendship between China and the Philippines and serves the all-round growth of cooperation between the two countries," Wang said.

"The decision of the Chinese government to set up this consulate general in Davao speaks of our full confidence in the city's future," Wang said. He added that with the consulate general open, "China is ready to broaden cooperation with Davao and the southern Philippines".

"Davao City had enjoyed political stability, social harmony and prosperity, and had become one of the most tranquil cities in the Philippines," Wang said.

"We are not just opening the consulate general, but also demonstrating our strong resolve for close cooperation between China and the Philippines."

When Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte was mayor of Davao City, he pushed to improve ties with China, particularly with the local Chinese community.

In 2004, then mayor Duterte signed an ordinance creating a Davao City Chinatown District located in a 44-hectare area downtown with a predominant Chinese population.

Consul General Li said the idea of establishing a consulate general in Davao was not a recent one.

"The two countries reached a consensus in 1996 to add a Chinese consulate general in Davao after one in Cebu when the Philippine government decided to establish a new consulate general in China," he said.

The idea did not come up again until President Duterte's first state



Davao City is home to the third Chinese consulate general in the Philippines, which was officially inaugurated on Oct 28.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY



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visit to China in 2016 when he met with China's President Xi Jinping.

"Both leaders again mentioned setting up a consulate general in the president's hometown of Davao

City," Li said. "The fact the president is from Davao is just a coincidence as this had been raised a long time before Mr Duterte was elected president."

China has a consulate general in Cebu, the second-largest city in the Philippines, and a consulate in Laoag in the northern Luzon region.

"Of course, we are aware of the peace and security issues in some areas here in Mindanao. But hopefully these will be in the past," Li said. "I believe Mindanao has reached an historic point in its development."

He noted the fact that Duterte is the first president ever to be elected from the country's south, which puts more attention on Mindanao.

"Because of his strong personality and passion for his country and homeland, the president not only attracts the attention of Filipino people but international attention as well," Li said.

There are now four official consular institutions in Davao, belonging to China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Japan.

He said the number of honorary consuls in Davao has been steadily increasing, with two new honorary consuls from Bangladesh and Hungary recently added.

Li said Mindanao, partially due to conflict, had lagged behind the rest of the Philippines in terms of

economic and social development.

"However, with the signing of the Bangsamoro Organic Law in July 2018, I think Mindanao is entering a new era in its development," he said. The law is envisioned to bring greater autonomy and more power to the Bangsamoro region in Mindanao.

"Moreover, Mindanao has so much to offer in terms of agriculture, fisheries and tourism and it is also a perfect fit in China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Philippines' Build Build, Build Strategy," Li said

In terms of concrete cooperation projects, upon close consultation with the local government, a direct flight route between Davao and Hong Kong began on Oct 28, and another direct route between Davao and Jinjiang city of East China's Fujian province is expected to open in December. Major infrastructure projects like expressways, railway and bridges will also go ahead.

People-to-people exchanges and cultural projects like sister-city relations and education cooperation will be increased. In order to support the Philippine government's campaign against drug abuse, the Chinese government has donated two drug rehabilitation centers to Mindanao.

Li also wants to breathe new life into the BIMP-EAGA (Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines — East ASEAN Growth Area). BIMP-EAGA was launched in 1994 as a cooperation initiative between the four Southeast Asian nations, with the primary objective to boost economic development in the resource-rich region.

"Earlier this year, when I had a meeting with Secretary Datu Abu Alonto, chairman of the Mindanao Development Authority, we discussed BIMP-EAGA and he mentioned BIMP-EAGA Plus 1 (China)," Li said.

"I think BIMP-EAGA could also be part of the Belt and Road Initiative."

Li said that long-term stability of international cooperation is key to social and economic development, which is the experience of China's reform and opening-up. Mindanao has now reached that point, he added.

For Li, this is his first diplomatic posting, having previously worked with the Fujian local government. The Philippines has a close historical relationship with Fujian as some 90 percent of Chinese in the Philippines are originally from the province.