

BILATERAL TIES

## Czech PM says country to reopen embassy in Singapore

Rebecca Lynne Tan

THE STRAITS TIMES/ANN/SINGAPORE

One of the first things on the agenda for Czech Republic Prime Minister Andrej Babis when he heads home after his first official trip to Singapore, and to Asia, is to reopen an embassy in Singapore.

"To help and promote relations, I have decided to reopen the embassy in Singapore," Mr Babis said, noting Singapore's importance as a hub for trade and finance in the region.

Speaking exclusively to *The Straits Times* on Tuesday, he added: "I don't understand why we don't have an embassy here [...] but we have to reopen it."

The Czech Republic Embassy in Singapore closed in 2008. Since then, the country's ambassador to Indonesia has been responsible for matters between Singapore and the Czech Republic.

Babis was in town on a two-day official visit that began with an of-

ficial welcome ceremony at the Istana on Monday evening. He also called on President Halimah Yacob and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who hosted him to an official dinner.

Earlier on Tuesday, he visited the Singapore Botanic Gardens, where an orchid was named in his honour. He also delivered a keynote speech at the fourth Singapore-Czech Republic Business Forum at The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore. Present at the forum were Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry and Education Chee Hong Tat, who also spoke.

Babis also met Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat and described their meeting as "fantastic" and "educational". They spoke "very concretely about debt, assets and so on", he said.

He added he is happy that he and Heng share a similar opinion on economic strategy.

When asked if his country,

which has been part of the European Union since 2004, would join the eurozone – the bloc of EU member countries that have adopted the euro as their currency – he was quick to respond with a "no".

"No. If I am in government, definitely not."

On maintaining an independent currency, he said: "We are very much an export[-oriented] country. If we were to enter the euro zone, then of course, we will be in the club with countries which don't perform very well – they are not very much responsible for the budget, they have a high debt [...]"

"It is also a question [of whether] to be independent. I know that we have some obligation to enter the eurozone but the eurozone will need to reform because there are some countries which have high debt, and are not so much budgetary responsible."

Another item on Babis' list is to establish a direct airline connec-

tion between Prague and Singapore to better facilitate economic relations and promote tourism.

The Czech Republic is Singapore's 14<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner in the EU.

Bilateral trade between Singapore and the Czech Republic stood at S\$1.15 billion (US\$848.35 million) in 2017, with imports amounting to S\$486.5 million and exports amounting to S\$660.2 million. In 2005, trade between Singapore and the Czech Republic amounted to S\$300 million.

Babis also visited Nanyang Technological University's Center of Excellence for Testing and Research of Autonomous Vehicles on Tuesday.

The university signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of Chemistry and Technology, Prague, on a partnership for research in energy storage and future mobility solutions.

Babis heads to Thailand and India after Singapore.