



Ahmed Latheef

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My association with China dates back over three decades. My first visit to China was in 1973 when I came to represent my country at a table tennis tournament in the city when it was still known as Peking, as part of the first sports team to travel abroad from my country. I have very fond memories of my first visit, which provided us the opportunity to learn about table tennis and subsequently introduce the new skills and techniques of the game in my country. It was also an opportunity to experience a new culture. The 7-foot-long group photograph of all the players and officials (over 1,200 people) taken at the Great Hall of the People is one of the most cherished mementos of my visit and is proudly displayed in my sitting room.

Since then I have visited China on many occasions: for sports, work and

for a holiday. During these visits I was able to see the tremendous progress the country has achieved since my first visit 24 years ago. Despite the huge economic changes, what is most remarkable is that the friendly and hospitable people of this great country have not changed. They are always keen to help and they try to interact with you, even if you cannot speak their language.

I am now in Beijing as the head of mission of the Embassy of the Maldives and am delighted that I will be here for the next 3-4 years in this land of my dreams.

In addition to fulfilling my responsibilities as a career diplomat for over 25 years, I have been actively involved in promoting sports in my country for a long time, particularly table tennis.

I have been an envoy of my country, not only in a diplomatic sense, but also as a sportsman. As a diplomat, I have served in Nepal, India and now in China. As a sportsman I have participated in many international sporting events, including the Asian Games, South Asian Federation Games, Indian Ocean Island Games and the Asian Table Tennis Championship in Beijing in 1990.

I am extremely delighted that I will be in Beijing when the city hosts the 2008 Olympics and it will be a great pleasure and an honor for me and the people of the Maldives, if I am selected as a torchbearer. I believe I will be representing not only my country, but also other small island nations like the Maldives.