

# The unknown Malaysian: Time to <sup>P</sup> act

KUALA LUMPUR: Two headlines emerging from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recent US visit have again raised the question of Malaysia's image abroad and lack of one as the case in the US.

The first headline read: "Malaysia is of no news to US newsmen". It referred to remarks made by American newsmen covering the Prime Minister's White House visit which some of them held little interest in them.

The second, a few days later, read: Malaysia will no longer remain silent on major issues reporting Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's enunciation of Malaysia's foreign policy at a Washington dinner.

While the first reflects only the low priority White House correspondents may attach to Malaysia, the second underscores Malaysia's determination to be heard on world issues despite any criticisms may draw from certain countries.

of Iranian revolutionary ideas to Malaysia? How do we support free enterprise but not want to be under the thumb of any free enterprise powers? How do we explain our non-aligned stance when we are also a member of Asean in which only three of its members are non-aligned? Are we not a friend of the US and yet, an ally? Overcoming the lack of awareness about Malaysia, be it in the US or elsewhere, and the need to convincingly put across our international positions calls for an overhaul of our overseas information network.

W.C. should not go around blaming the Press of any country for not being interested in Malaysia. The fault is ours. The Press of each country has its own priorities based on what are perceived to be the interests of the particular country.

For instance, how much did Malaysians know about Chad until the recent invasion by Libyan-backed forces hauled it into the limelight in the local newspapers? And once the immediate means than just relying on reports by news agencies, feature syndicates or visitine journalists.

There is of course the diplomatic network concomitant with this is the external information service which normally works with the diplomats. But other than these official channels, awareness of Malaysia abroad is created by students, businessmen, Government officials who visit or stay in various countries for any number reasons.

The reverse process is also true in that people from any country visiting Malaysia take back with them an increased awareness of Malaysia which spreads in concentric though diminishing circles around their relatives and friends.

## Promote

Malaysia, for instance, is quite well-known in Australia partly because of the thousands of students who have gone there over the years and lived there and mixed with Australians.

and smuggling by North Korean diplomats once again hit the newsrooms of the world.

This built up the pressure against the North Koreans which may have contributed to the actions of freeze or break diplomatic ties with Pyongyang.

The South Koreans have a full-scale Korean Overseas Information Service (KOIS) headed by a Director-General in the Ministry of Culture and Information which is responsible for such publications.

In normal times, they produce handsome books and pamphlets summarising the policies of the Seoul Government and the speeches and remarks of the President.

Propaganda? Sure, Korean diplomats admit it. But it appears to have produced results in terms of the number of orders for Korean industrial products that are pouring in. From nowhere they have become one of the foremost builders of ships and oil rigs.

The Korean officials say there is a deliberate, organised drive by the KOIS to change the world's image of South Korea from one of being a developing country to that of a newly industrialised one.

By comparison, the Malaysian External Information Service is a small section in the Foreign Ministry, under the control of an Under-Secretary for General Affairs and a Director of External Information who has little say over policy.

They are of the opinion that Malaysia is not doing enough to promote itself abroad. They speak of having had to seek out the Malaysian embassy staff in their countries for information on Malaysia.

And Malaysian diplomats themselves can do plenty in the country they are serving in, to promote awareness of Malaysia and understanding of her policies on important regional or international issues.

However, there are occasional reports of Malaysian diplomats who hardly go out to win new friends, content to move only in their own secure diplomatic circles.

An official attempt to create awareness in foreign countries is popularly called propaganda. And many countries who have high-profile international images use exactly this method to get where they are.

Take the example of South Korea. People who have little say over policy everywhere in the world.

This identity or image enigma is not new. It results from the paradox of international affairs awareness: Countries which are not crises-ridden and not engaged in wars do not become household names all over the world.

Seri Mahathir himself joked about it while in Washington saying that unfortunately (in the awareness sense) Malaysia was not a place where American soldiers had fought.

But the two stories pinpoint a deeper question of what gets printed about Malaysia in the American or other national papers of the world.

While the international affairs news paradox may easily explain why American newsmen know or care so little about Malaysia, it still leaves a nagging doubt: Other trouble-free countries do get recognition why not Malaysia?

The second, which reported the Prime Minister's succinct explanation of Malaysia's stance on several international issues, poses the question of how we are going to explain to the world our sometimes apparently contradictory stands?

How is it that we profess to be an Islamic country and yet have acted to prevent the export of diatomic threat of war was over, how much have we been able to learn about what has been happening since in that African country with which we have apparently no links?

The way smaller, less significant countries get ignored by the Press of a country is not the doing of say the British or American Press.

Coups and rebellions were about the only times our own newspapers took an interest in the tiny island States of the South Pacific, until Datuk Seri Mahathir initiated the policy of developing closer ties with them.

And since some of our businessmen are now investing in these countries, we should be reading more often about them. But are we?

And perhaps more to the point, how much positive news (labelled development news) are our newspapers printing about achievements and progress in other member nations of this seemingly closely knit organisation?

SQ, perhaps, our own newspapers are as guilty of the very negativeness and lack of interest that newspapers of other countries are accused of. But this is really missing the point about awareness.

Nations generally create awareness of Some of them build now lasting relationships with Australians who later come and visit them here and keep in touch with them regularly. Some of these friends later may rise into positions of influence in the Australian community.

Australia, Asia, particularly, many Malaysians have also emigrated to the continent to work and live there. They form another important link in the awareness-creating network.

Lately hundreds, if not thousands, of Malaysian students have also been opting for education in the US. This should create an excellent network of "little ambassadors" for Malaysia.

However, according to reports from the US officials, many of the Malaysians who are now in the US prefer to live in little enclaves all by themselves rather than go out and mix with Americans.

Life in these Malaysian kampungs in the US may be more convenient but the lack of socialising with the host people robs our country of a perfect chance to create awareness of Malaysia abroad.

Another way nations seek to win influence in any country is by hosting journalists who are given briefings and taken sight-seeing.

Malaysia is no longer a poor developing country The South Koreans have recruited top-notch newsmen to serve in the KOIS but Malaysia's service is manned mostly by career information officers.

According to some diplomats, Malaysia puts too little priority on overseas information officers.

Perhaps, the time has come to create a full-fledged department of overseas information on the same footing as the Department of Information which services local needs.

We cannot expect overseas newspapers and officials to keep themselves informed about Malaysia unless we ourselves generate the information we want them to know.

The South Koreans can provide a good example. Two weeks after the selling Malaysia abroad, the KAL jet, is part of their job, they have to go about it in diplomatic ways.

A full-fledged Overseas Information Service, controlled by the Information Ministry but working closely with the Foreign, Trade and Primary Commodities Ministries might be a good start towards improving our image abroad.

As Dr Mahathir said, Malaysia is going to take a more active role in international affairs instead of remaining a member of the silent majority.

To voice this role, we will need stronger vocal chords.