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A Bernama Year-ENDER

BUSY YEAR ON THE DIPLOMATIC FRONT

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KUALA LUMPUR: Led by a tireless Prime Minister, Malaysia continued to stand and be counted on the world stage with the election of a Malaysian to the president post of the United Nations General Assembly.

The unanimous election of Tan Sri Razali Ismail as the President of the 51st session of the UNGA in New York on Sept 17 in fact capped the year for the country as an eventful and fruitful one.

Clad in a Malay dress with a songkok, Razali accorded pride of place to the Malay language at the UNGA when he made his opening speech in the language.

Razali's election reflected not only the nation's high standing in the international arena, but also a recognition of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's efforts to secure justice and peace on various world issues.

The Kuala Lumpur government has always believed that the UN is an excellent forum for Third World countries to protect their rights and livelihood, and a place to speak for the emerging countries. Gaining the top seat is a bonus in this respect.

A day before Razali was elected to the top post, Foreign Ministry Secretary-General Datuk Abdul Halim Ali clocked out for the last time at Wisma Putra, after holding it for only 21 days, to become the new Chief Secretary to the Government.

The appointment of Halim underscored the importance Dr Mahathir placed on a civil service that is in tune with the globalisation process of the country's economy.

The year also saw the retirement of Foreign Ministry Secretary-General Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar, who is now the Prime Minister's Special Envoy.

For Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, it was a particularly good year because he was elected a vice-president of Umno in the October party elections, despite his heavy overseas schedule.

Malaysia has also taken on an international role by taking over the chairmanships of several international groupings, among them the Group of 15 developing nations and Asean.

Kuala Lumpur is set to host the two groups' meetings next year. Of special significance is Asean, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary in September.

The year 1996 was also a turning point in the protracted talks between Malaysia and Indonesia over their overlapping claims to two islands, Ligitan and Sipadan. The two neighbours agreed to refer the dispute to the International Court of Justice for arbitration.

Ties with Malaysia's closest neighbour, Singapore, however, had its bad moments.

A statement by the island republic's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew that there should be meritocracy in Malaysia if Singapore were to rejoin Malaysia in future, triggered an unpleasant situation in the bilateral relations.

Back home, a stream of VVIP visitors kept the staffs of the Bunga Raya lounge at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport and Wisma Putra busy throughout the year.

The red carpet was rolled out for a King, a prince, presidents and prime ministers. A record total of 16 heads of government and state visited the country.

The first visitor for the year was the Australian Prime Minister then,

Paul Keating, on Jan 15, followed by Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chereitien a few days later.

This was followed by King Carl Gustaf of Sweden on March 12, Cambodian First Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh (March 30), Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister Julius Chan (April 1), Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev (May 27).

Others were Uruguay's President Dr Julio Maria Sanguinetti (July 2), Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka (Aug 5), Myanmar's General Than Shwe (Aug 12), Argentina's President Carlos Menem (Aug 23), Malawi's President Bakili Muluzi, (Sept 5), Indonesia's President Suharto (Oct 6), Peru's President Alberto Fujimori (Nov 21) and South Korean President Kim Young Sam (Nov 26).

This year also proved to be yet another hectic year for Dr Mahathir -- he visited 25 countries, criss-crossing from as far as Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean to neighbouring Brunei.

Highly regarded throughout the world as an international statesman, Dr Mahathir has made a lasting impression upon other world leaders during his visits.

His first trip this year was to Thailand to attend the first Asia-Europe meeting (Asem), followed by visits to Vietnam, New Zealand, Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Brunei, Japan, Krygstan, Kazakhstan, China, Portugal, Guinea, Ghana, Trinidad and Tobago, Holland and Saudi Arabia.

He is ending the year with a visit to India this week, where he is also scheduled to receive to Jawaharlal Nehru Award For International Understanding.

He was also in the United States where he held discussions with President Bill Clinton and while in France, Dr Mahathir met President Jacques Chirac.

Apart from Asem, the Prime Minister also attended several other international meetings, namely, the inaugural World Solar Summit and the G-15 summit in Zimbabwe, the informal summit of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) in Manila and the Asean Informal Summit in Jakarta.

He also witnessed the launching of Malaysia's second satellite, Measat II, in Kourou, French Guyana.

During his many speeches, Dr Mahathir took steps to serve notice to the developed nations, that they cannot use strongarm tactics to impose trading rules on others but that they should be agreed upon through negotiations besides taking into account the differing levels of economic development among the countries involved.

Kuala Lumpur also hosted many regional meetings such as the Commonwealth Law Ministers Conference, the Asean-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation meeting and the annual International Quran Reading Competition.

Indeed, 1996 could very well be the Year of Wisma Putra. -- Bernama
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