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A lion roars through town

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WHY do more people on this planet know more about Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tom Cruise, Mel Gibson, Sylvester Stallone, Harrison Ford, Julia Roberts and other Hollywood bigwigs ... and not the politicians from their neighbouring countries?

The reason is the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and its international counterpart, the Motion Picture Association (MPA).

On this planet, there are probably no other lobbying bodies with as much clout as the MPAA and MPA. (OK, OK, the tobacco industry is probably somewhere up there too!)

According to the information at the MPAA website (<http://www.mpa.org/>), the MPAA and the MPA jointly serve as the voice and advocate of the American motion picture, home video and television industries.

Jack Valenti, the man helming these two associations as MPAA president and chief executive officer and as MPA chairman and chief executive officer, was in town last week.

His job is basically to travel around the globe and tackle obstacles and hurdles - mainly piracy - in the path of the growth of the American movie industry.

Valenti said that the main purpose of the visit was to call on an old friend, Tun Omar Ong Yoke Lin, who was Malaysia's ambassador to the United States in 1962.

He also wanted to find out more about the Multimedia Super Corridor.

During a brief session with the Press, he gave the impression that he was impressed with Malaysia's IT initiative.

"It shows that your Prime Minister is a visionary and has to be commended. For the first time, I understood what is happening (here) and what the MSC is all about."

Valenti had visited five nations including Malaysia in two weeks as part of his Asian visit to report back to the studios "about the situation here".

He was referring to piracy and intellectual copyright infringements, something that both the MPAA and MPA gravely frown upon.

Valenti delivered a blend of praise and warning when he was asked to comment on whether he was satisfied with the intellectual property copyright enforcement here.

"I am satisfied with the MSC... I am sure you won't let the piracy problem ruin its prospects.

"In dealing with piracy and intellectual copyright, I feel this Government understands how important this is. I am sure the Government will move swiftly to make sure piracy is visibly decreased."

Displaying a blunt frankness that demonstrated his efficiency, Valenti cited how he managed to purchase three pirated videotapes at a shopping mall here for RM35.

He said the American software industry was "equally concerned" over the theft of software programmes.

The MPA's ties with the US software industry are an extremely binding one as every movie produced in Hollywood nowadays, directly or indirectly, uses IT in its production and creation.

As Valenti has much influence in Silicon Valley, his words have added significance, especially since MSC's lifeline is directly linked to the American IT industry.

"I am sure the MSC developer (Multimedia Development Corporation Sdn Bhd), will bring up the issues discussed here to the PM's attention," he said confidently.

Asked what he will be reporting back to the Hollywood studios, he said: "I will report on the Super Corridor and mention that the Government of Malaysia will take swift action to address the problem of piracy."

Valenti said that in Malaysia, there is "no language problem and it is so much easier to steal software. You are a very literate nation."

When this writer asked if there would be price reductions on the part of the MPA and the software industry to counter piracy, Valenti re-positioned his chair, locked eye-contact and said point-blank: "If I stole a US\$50,000 car and sold it to you for US\$100..."

The point hit a home run. MPA will never compromise on the "theft of our products", as he seriously put it.

He said that even if the motion picture industry did lower prices, copyright infringers would do the same. It would be "an endless and pointless tit-for-tat scenario".

To a question on nipping the piracy problem at the bud, that is, taking action against the plants that manufacture and distribute these pirated products, a visibly uncomfortable Tan Sri Othman Yeop Abdullah, the executive chairman of Multimedia Development Corporation, intervened and said that local enforcement agencies will look into the matter.

On his part, Valenti said that the MPA was "definitely looking very steadily, with great planning, to do more (anti-piracy) work in Asia".

Explaining his determination to wipe out piracy, Valenti said that the US movie industry loses US\$1.5 billion every year in Asia.

Of his visit to China, he said that the problem MPA faced in China was market access.

The Chinese authorities drove a hard bargain even in the face of the powerful MPA.

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