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Daim impresses with command of details

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THE Falcon 900 was cruising shortly after leaving Maputo, capital of Mozambique. Its dapper owner trotted to its rear, by now filled with an assortment of paintings, boxes, suits, gifts, a songkok, books and a pair of sandals.

Briskly, he manoeuvred to create a little space on the rear seats where baggage had overflowed. And perhaps with the same degree of discipline and efficiency that has earned him accolades, Tun Daim Zainuddin soon fell into a slumber.

The Economic Adviser to the Government has had a frenetic schedule in Mozambique, and before that, Morocco, Guinea, Ghana, Uganda and Kenya.

During his 16-day tour, he had spoken to Presidents, Prime Ministers, Finance Ministers and economic advisers from morning to night, with nonchalance and frankness. "I want you to think strategically," he told blushing Ministers during one of the stops.

Daim had hopped from airports to presidential palaces; huddled with senior Ministers; appreciated by gracious hosts; and, made quick forays to art galleries. Still, he found time for little workouts and reading. "There are always new books on my plane and at any given time I will be reading." He is currently reading something on Islam.

"You must pace yourself," he said, when his incredible fitness, drive and quality of preparations cropped up in an interview at the end of the tour.

"The moment the plane takes off, I get some sleep. Somehow, no matter how long the flight is, half-an-hour before landing, I am up, washed up and ready ... you have to be ready, and mustn't look letih (exhausted) at meetings."

He was looking fresh, with an open-necked shirt, coat, jeans, Nike shoes, minus the trademark blue Bersatu cap. He had just said goodbye to two Mauritius Ministers after they had dinner with him at the hotel he was staying. The dinner took place barely 10 minutes after he arrived from a five-hour flight from Cape Town.

Often, members of the Malaysian business delegation travelling with him, watch in disbelief as he dashed into airport VIP lounges and exchanged quick pleasantries with people greeting him.

And within an hour, he will be rattling off some curious details - like why there is high inflation when people have only RM16 to spend a month - to his mesmerised hosts in meeting rooms.

"I like to see Malaysians disciplined and knowledgeable. You must read before you visit a country, before you land you must have all the facts."

There were eight African countries with so much to learn about but such little time.

One country had a long civil war; another 30 years of bliss but some tribal equation to worry about. Another has the world's largest bauxite reserves and is nervous about businessmen from a certain place. Yet another has a 2,800km coastline, a good set of reform-minded Ministers, but fears the return of a new form of colonialism. A fourth just listens to the Americans.

"I must be knowledgeable, I must know the subject matter. I meet various Ministers, so I have to know everything, otherwise they will not be impressed. We have to show we are serious people."

Discipline is a recurring theme of the interview and in his African

tour. Hardwork and discipline was his main advice to the African countries.

In all these places, he has access to top leaders and given priority treatment or, as a member of the Malaysian delegation put it, "treatment accorded to a deputy head of State".

In Guinea, Ghana, Mozambique and Kenya, the Presidents made generous gestures that Daim was most welcome in their countries.

Daniel T. Arap Moi, who has led Kenya for 19 years, hosted a lunch at the Nairobi National Park. It evoked scenes from western movies depicting Arab princes and princesses dining in luxury tents. But there was no opulence in Moi's gesture - tents were spartan, but the food and goodwill generous.

Daim said people gave him access because of the international standing of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. And he was representing Dr Mahathir.

Accolades had been heaped on him everywhere.

In turn, he has been blunt. He berated his hosts, especially for letting the World Bank and International Monetary Fund stifle their economies, by giving them dosages of "book economics" advice: they must curb inflation by raising interest rates.

He also contends that some poor countries are not getting direct foreign investment because of high interest rates. Interest rates in some of these countries are as high as 48 per cent, which Daim said will effectively negate any profits.

This contentious issue seemed to irk him. "If the intention is to ask them to save, how can these poor people save when they don't even have money for their own upkeep.

"On the other hand, the rich will put money in the bank, and with high interest rates, they don't have to work. That could be the intention of the developed countries.

"And when there is no investment, the poor have no jobs. When I asked them why interest rates are so high, they said it was on the advice of the World Bank."

But in a country like Mozambique where the World Bank said annual per capita income is US\$80 (RM200), there could not be inflation caused by lavish spending.

"For heaven's sake, I told them, reduce the interest rate and see the effects." His frustration stemmed from the fact that the World Bank's advice simply defied logic.

He said in Kenya, telephone lines were limited and requests by the Government to increase the power capacity were reportedly shot down by the World Bank.

Daim also felt that the desire by the private sector to reap big profits in some countries was a minus point in efforts to get direct foreign investment.

Besides exorbitant telephone rates, the hotel in Maputo charged US\$5 for room service. He made it clear to Mozambiquean Ministers that such unreasonable charges were counter-productive.

Daim said in most cases, senior members of Government in the countries he visited accepted his candid views. "They have read about me, so they know my style."

Daim said he made it a point to ask his hosts whether they wanted him to be forthright or diplomatic. They always favoured the former.

Repeatedly, Daim impressed his hosts with his knack for details.

"Governments must go into details, get feedback on the ground. They should not just say 'this is our policy' without knowing whether it is being implemented."

In Morocco, his first stop, he wondered why the country was getting less than two million tourists a year, including just 180 Malaysians, when neighbouring Spain pulled in 60 million.

"Its Prime Minister (Abdelatif Filali) asked me to offer the reasons for this. I told him the five-star hotels don't give five-star service. They are not marketing anything new, yet they have so much to offer."

Throughout his tour, Daim kept telling his hosts they have vast potential, from the 5,760km coastline in Morocco, to the 2,800km coast of Mozambique, from the exotic attractions in Marrakesh to the palm-ringed, sea-fronting Hotel Polano in Maputo.

He said the root cause of their poverty was that the economy was based on agriculture, and production costs exceeding selling prices.

"They are producers of raw materials with no control over prices. I asked them to show me the advantages and disadvantages ... because if you lose why do you keep doing it? It will eat into the economy."

"In a market economy, they have to compete. The workers are not trained for this, so they must be educated. Their culture towards work must also change."

These countries are unspoilt environmentally, which impressed Daim greatly, as no matter how poor they were, they attach importance to the greenery.

To the former Finance Minister, not exploiting the respective country's resources tops the list of "don'ts" for the new breed of Malaysian businessmen criss-crossing the world for investment opportunities.

"To earn respect, our businessmen must not behave like others, who were just out to get concessions and exploit them. We must treat them like partners and train them as managers."

As for workers in these countries, Malaysian businessmen will have to drive home the message that salaries must match productivity; they will get a bonus if they do well; no strikes; and always put the country first. "Malaysians must invest with their hearts and be caring."

So, this is the man 13 years after he walked into the limelight as Finance Minister, largely tight-lipped when surrounded by gaggles of reporters.

There have been comparisons with Tiny Rowlands of Lornho who has links to top African leaders. But Daim said while Rowlands did his own business and built his own empire, he (Daim) brought Malaysian businessmen, introducing them to the key decision-makers.

"I can open doors," he said, in an apparent reference to the access he has to Presidents and Prime Ministers.

Daim said apart from being Economic Adviser, he would make himself available to the private sector for advice. "I will do what I can."

When pointed out that six years after he gave up the post of Finance Minister there has been no sign of him slowing down, he said: "I am just helping the country and business people ... that's all" and rushed to another subject.

"We are a strong supporter of South-South co-operation. Malaysia wants new markets. But if these countries remain poor, they can't buy our exports. We must help them with their economy. Create jobs and let their income grow and with that they can buy our goods. Let us prosper together."

At 59, many feel Daim could have retired after a successful career in business and his immense contributions to the country as Finance Minister.

Yet he is tirelessly promoting the country, giving valuable advice to businessmen, and at the same time, helping poor countries around the world.

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