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Don't drag Thailand into Malaysia-Singapore row

Pratanporn Thaviphoke

AT the peak of the ramifying furore between Malaysia and Singapore, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad once said that good neighbours only do nice things for one another.

Your newspapers seem to have ignored completely his wise remarks when they unjustifiably dragged Thailand, Malaysia's other neighbour, into the on-going Malaysia-Singapore dispute with the publication of two cartoons signed by M Desa (NST, May 22 and New Sunday Times, May 25).

The two cartoons have insulted Thailand and its people.

We are deeply disturbed and perplexed by the intention of their publication.

At the same time, we are saddened that your newspapers, among the most respected in this region, have deemed it appropriate to use the AIDS problem and other social ills, which are matters of grave concern to the international community, merely as tools in the seemingly endless wrangle between Malaysia and her southern neighbour, while hitting out at Thailand in the process.

Would it not be more constructive if your newspapers spent more time on how countries in this region could assist one another?

It is very ironic indeed that it was only a few weeks ago that the Royal Thai Embassy extended an invitation to a group of Malaysian journalists, including one from the New Straits Times Group, to visit Thailand so that they, and thus the readers, could learn more about our experiences in battling social ills, e.g. illicit drugs, HIV, or AIDS, which are also of great concern in Malaysia.

We have never stated that Thailand is free from these problems.

Actually, both the Government and non-governmental agencies have joined forces in tackling openly the causes of these social ills.

And, our efforts in these areas have won praise from various corners of the international community, including Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, chairwoman of the AIDS Council of Malaysia.

As one of the world's most attractive tourist spots, Thailand has a lot to offer its visitors.

It has never tried to woo Malaysian tourists to enjoy anything but mainly its nice beaches, delicious food, good handicraft and warm hospitality.

Is it, therefore, fair for M. Desa and the publishers of the two newspapers to treat Thailand, which is one of Malaysia's closest neighbours, in such an unfriendly manner?

It is my fervent hope that the New Straits Times and the New Sunday Times will prove themselves to be newspapers that are professional, responsible and respectful in this Southeast Asian region as it moves towards a more closely-knit community.

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