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Dramatic moments in Prime Minister's visit to Pakistan

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MALAYSIANS have noted with keen interest the news that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is taking a two-month break to travel overseas, spend time writing, and conduct occasional working visits.

We have read of his many accomplishments during his business visits abroad. It also brings to light the crucial role played by ambassadors and embassy staff in ensuring that the visits run smoothly and bring benefit to Malaysia and the host country.

The official visit of the Prime Minister to the country you are accredited to can be considered the highlight of an ambassador's tour of duty. I recall the pleasure and the drama generated during the Prime Minister's visit to Pakistan.

Dr Mahathir was arriving from Bangladesh on the conclusion of his visit there. Pakistani dignitaries and the various ambassadors were making preparations to go to the airport for the arrival ceremony when we were informed that there would be a delay as Dr Mahathir had been caught up in a ceremony in Chittagong.

We waited anxiously for the new time of arrival. It was getting dark and I was worried that the ceremony might have to be abandoned. Imagine how relieved we felt when the Prime Minister finally arrived in the executive jet with members of his delegation.

It was almost dark but there was just enough light to proceed with the ceremony. It was quite a moving moment for me when the Prime Minister was led to the dais accompanied by the strains of Negaraku. After he had inspected the guard-of-honour, I accompanied the Prime Minister to be introduced to the dignitaries. I expressed my heartfelt appreciation to the ambassadors who had waited so long and come all the way from Islamabad to the airport in Rawalpindi.

I had arranged a dinner for the Prime Minister and his delegation at Rumah Malaysia which would also be attended by other Malaysians and Pakistanis. However, since the other delegation members, in a separate aircraft, arrived later, their dinner had to be postponed. Dr Mahathir and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali had their dinner with me and the president of the Malaysia-Pakistan Association. When we had finished dinner, the rest of the delegation arrived. They had already had their dinner on board the aircraft but were sporting enough to have another go!

As the Prime Minister had visited Pakistan before, I had to arrange something different. I decided to have him visit the province of North West Frontier, in particular the famous Khyber Pass. To ensure that the programme ran smoothly I had my military attache recce the place a week earlier.

When the Prime Minister arrived at the place he was most enthusiastic and noted its potential as a tourist destination. He later confided to his host that he had waited almost 60 years to visit the historic pass.

Knowing the Prime Minister's interest in the aircraft industry I arranged for him to visit an aircraft maintenance factory. It was the most traumatic visit for me to implement. While we were waiting to board a helicopter for the half-hour flight, a heavy thunderstorm erupted. We managed to take off when the storm abated slightly. When we arrived at the factory the storm was still raging on and at one point, while the Prime Minister was being briefed on the factory's operations, the lights went off momentarily.

Still, the visit was successful, and the Prime Minister showed keen interest in the work of overhauling jets and the development of a trainer aircraft.

On the way back in our helicopter the sky was overcast. We were flying for lunch with our host Nawaz Sharif. The flight was smooth but as we approached the hill resort, a mist had appeared and covered the whole landing area. We had to abort the landing and return to Islamabad.

Since the Prime Minister's lunch date had been cancelled, he had to settle for lunch with the High Commissioner, me. It must be one of the highlights of the job to have the Prime Minister all to yourself! Dr Mahathir was active as usual and after lunch decided to visit the Faisal Mosque. We made a quick tour of the place, accompanied only by his security guard and protocol officials.

In Islamabad, the Prime Minister received wide media coverage. In addition to a Press conference, I also arranged for him to be interviewed by Pakistan Television. The interviewer, an academician and television personality, was also the secretary of the Malaysia-Pakistan Association. In Karachi the Prime Minister and his delegation held rounds of discussions with the business sector.

Dr Mahathir's visit to Pakistan was well-received. With his popularity it was not difficult to arrange it. In the course of the visit the two Prime Ministers met several times for discussions. The lunch at the Murree Hill Resort was meant to be a relaxed get-together.

However, the cancellation of the lunch continued to haunt me. I was therefore delighted to read that the Prime Minister, after completing his recent visit to the Gulf states, was able to make a few hours' stopover in Islamabad to renew friendship with Nawaz who has just been returned to power as Prime Minister.

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