

22/09/1997

Justice must not only be done but must be seen to be done

Datuk A. Kadir Jasin

THE Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, deserves the highest praise for ordering Malaysian companies responsible for the open burning of forests in Indonesia to bear the cost of fighting the fires now raging in the Republic.

The move, said the Prime Minister, is to alleviate the Government's burden and to ensure that the companies are accountable for their actions.

The order has an added significance as it was issued through the National Security Council. The power and authority of the NSC are generally invoked in cases involving national security and the declaration of an emergency.

Disclosing the Prime Minister's order, the Information Minister, Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, who is the chairman of the National Disaster Relief Management Committee, said the order would take effect immediately.

The Indonesian Government had provided a list of 43 Malaysian companies which had entered into joint venture agreements with Indonesian parties to clear land for agricultural projects.

An earlier report suggested that at least 18 Malaysian companies operating in Indonesia were responsible for open burning. Mohamed said the companies involved could no longer plead ignorance.

As an added measure, the Government should release the names of the 43 Malaysian parties identified by Indonesia. If these companies wish to plead not guilty, the onus will be upon them to supply the proof.

Although the action came too late to stop the haze now blanketing Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, a concerted effort by the governments of the affected countries and their private sector may help ease the problem.

In the long run, such a firm stand by the Government will, hopefully, help safeguard Malaysia's image as more and more local companies venture abroad to do business.

Here, Dr Mahathir's uncompromising stand is not only understandable but legitimate.

If local investors turn out to be the "Ugly Malaysians" abroad, Dr Mahathir's own good name, as much as the good name of the country, will be at stake.

This is because the majority of Malaysian investors who are today engaged in business abroad do so at his behest through various official and unofficial foreign missions he led.

We may be able to excuse one or two Malaysian businessmen who marry women from the countries they do business in and make ladies out of them. It may even be excusable for them to live in expensive mansions, drive big cars and wine and dine at posh restaurants.

But to break the law and pollute the environment cannot be a sign of good corporate citizenship. In the case of the Malaysian companies named by the Indonesian Government, they not only caused misery to their hosts but to their own country as well.

Sadly, there appears to be some businessmen who are taking such policies as Malaysia incorporated and reversed investment for granted. Others unashamedly gloat about their closeness with top political leaders and a few treat the offices of Ministers as their own.

Still it shocked me recently to see a young well-known banker (rather, the owner of a commercial bank) turning up at the office of a very senior

Minister in a pair of faded blue jeans, unbuttoned T-shirt and a pair of loafers.

I have nothing against jeans. I wear them regularly. But it cannot be in good taste to visit a Minister's office on a working day in jeans, T-shirt and loafers no matter how powerful the person is as a banker or how close he is with the Minister and the Minister's staff.

Businessmen and others who enjoy the rare privilege of walking freely in the corridors of power should not take this for granted. Above all else, they should not abuse it.

They must be mindful of the saying "familiarity breeds contempt". But Ministers and their personal staff who tolerate this kind of conduct have only themselves to blame.

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