

02/02/1997

KL's strong strides forward

AS the 1.3 million people in the nation's capital celebrate Federal Territory Day, it is particularly poignant for those of us who were born and brought up in the city to reflect on its growth. Twenty-five years on and a lot of water has indeed gone under the bridges of Kuala Lumpur and how we have grown! Flipping through the month of February 1972's bound-volume of the New Straits Times, whose newsprint has already turned yellow, is going down memory lane with the nation.

Feb 1 that year was a significant national event for it marked the coming of age of Kuala Lumpur, this tin-mining town which sprang up at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak rivers. The NST report reads: "A dazzling eight-minute Parliament House ceremony and Kuala Lumpur - known 120 years ago as 'Muddy River Mouth' - became a city today." The then Prime Minister, the late Tun Abdul Razak and Technology, Research and Local Government Minister Datuk (now Tan Sri) Ong Kee Hui took part in the ceremony, ending with the appointment of Tan Sri Lokman Yusof as the Datuk Bandar. Two years later, Malaysians saw another historic event - Kuala Lumpur made a federal territory. Seeing the rapid growth of the city amid a booming Malaysia today and noting the observation made by Razak, predicting "tremendous changes" even before the 21st century, it is like a dream come true.

Of course, it is not the waving of a magic wand that made Kuala Lumpur what it is today, a city proudly joining the ranks of other modern capitals. It is the result of leadership, vision and hard work. Razak did not live long enough to make his dream a reality for he died four years later. Undeniably, the rapid growth of Kuala Lumpur owes much to the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, whose inspiring Malaysia Boleh has spurred a decade of unprecedented development, not only in the capital but also for the rest of the nation. "It is really the phase of free building that has stimulated the rapid development of the city," said a local architect. Certainly, the country's straight years of impressive economic growth following the deep recession in the mid-1980s is the catalyst.

Kuala Lumpur's phenomenal growth is not only the talk of the region but also the world. A recent New York Times write-up on the battle for the tallest building, has this for an opening paragraph: "Well, KL has won. The Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur were completed at the end of the year and hit the record height of 450 metres. Petronas is not one building but twin towers - does that mean that KL has won the world's highest building record twice?" Another landmark, the 421-metre Menara Kuala Lumpur, ranks fourth among the telecommunications towers. However, a city's progress is not measured by its skyscrapers alone. What about the people's living standards and quality of life?

Ironically, the growing illegal immigrant problem is an unbeatable indicator of the country's economic well-being. As ants take to sugar, it is difficult to stem the flow as long as job opportunities are good, especially in burgeoning Kuala Lumpur. Like in other rapidly developing cities, industrialisation has exacted a price. The quiet Kuala Lumpur of the 1970s, when the Hilton Hotel was the only high-rise at the present Golden Triangle and visitors then described it as "outside the town", is today a bustling metropolis, notorious for its traffic jams, air quality and squalor amid splendour. The obnoxious littering habit of many city

folk is a major contributory factor to the unhealthy surroundings. From the many pronouncements, there is no doubt that the authorities are concerned and do have plans to improve things. The crucial questions are: will, timing and efficiency. All in all, despite the moanings and groanings over the environment, deep in our hearts we are thankful that Kuala Lumpur is upholding the nation's symbol of unity and harmony among its multi-racial people. The prayers of our city fathers have been answered.

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