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Letting sleeping dogs lie

IF TIME was what Malaysia had reckoned it needed to get over the hurt cause by the row started by Singapore last March, it now seems that it will need a lot more than that. Several weeks ago, a newspaper in the republic opened up a wound still fresh from remarks made by the former Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, by suggesting that Lee's remarks in an affidavit that Johor was a place "notorious for shootings, muggings, and car-jackings", was indeed justified. Then, following news of a drop in the number of Singapore tourists to Malaysia, a Sunday newspaper in the republic said Singapore tourists will give Malaysia the miss during next month's school break in favour of Thailand and Indonesia "as a show of support for their leader"; this supposedly quoting resident committees, citizens' consultative committees and youth groups which help organise group tours in the republic.

At a time when the Malaysian Government has said Malaysians are prepared to let bygones be, some quarters seem intent in breathing life into the diplomatic skirmish. It does not help that Mr Wong Kan Seng, the Singapore Home Affairs Minister, failed to put an end, once and for all, to suspicions raised by Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik that the Singapore Government was somehow behind the drop in the number of tourists from the republic visiting Malaysia. Wong could have said that Sabbaruddin's suggestion was preposterous, false, misguided. Instead, according to a foreign news agency, while denying Malaysian news reports that the Singapore Government was discouraging Singaporeans from visiting Malaysia, Wong on the other hand said that Singaporeans "also have emotions and sensitivities" and "when they feel that others are hurling abuse at their leaders, I think they will not feel comfortable going to a place where they do not feel welcome".

There is little doubt that Singapore could do damage to the Malaysian tourism industry if it decides to discourage its people from travelling to Malaysia. In 1995, according to the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, tourists from Singapore contributed the most to Malaysia's tourism receipts, spending RM4.3 billion. This was far more than the combined spending of tourists from the other four countries in the top five list: Japan (RM682 million), Taiwan (RM630.7 million), Thailand (RM548 million), and the UK (RM323 million). Total receipts from foreign visitors last year reached RM9.18 billion. But even if Singaporeans stop coming to Malaysia, which is a very far-fetched prospect given the proximity - not just in terms of geography - between the two countries, the Malaysian tourism industry will be far from finished. In 1995, the country recorded 20.64 million departures by its people who spent more than RM5 billion holidaying overseas. If half the statistics could be encouraged to "depart" for local destinations, there would be more than enough to make up in terms of number. Malaysia will still lose in terms of foreign earnings if Singaporeans stop spending here, but at the same time there will be savings from currency outflow.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spoke recently on friends and foes, though not in relation to Singapore: "We'll befriend those who take us as friends. Likewise, if we're treated as enemies, we can be enemies and if people want to shoot us, we too can shoot back." The hope, at least on this side of the Causeway, is that no ill will bear upon the ties that have bound the two countries. The consequences can be critical:

there could be forced economic retaliation from Malaysia that could affect Singapore in a big way, from its trade and industries to its employment and port. No good neighbours would want to cause hardships to each other, just like no good friends would want to bad-mouth one another. Malaysia has said, and reiterated, that it was prepared to try and normalise relations with Singapore, except that it would take some time for ties to return to the old level. The Singapore Government has also said it was willing to normalise ties. But if certain quarters are allowed to take hard feelings to another higher level, instead, the result could be less than desirable.

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