

19/11/1997

Malott makes a bold stand

MR JOHN R. Malott, the US ambassador to Malaysia, made a politically courageous stand when he went on record to say that it had been inappropriate for congressmen in Washington to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The ambassador made this statement almost immediately after his return from a two-week European tour. He obviously wished to waste no time in trying to undo whatever damage had been inflicted upon US-Malaysia relations. In the Malaysian media, his statement on Monday was overshadowed only by reports of the support expressed by French President Jacques Chirac for Dr Mahathir's proposal to regulate currency trading and defy a US threat of sanctions upon a Malaysian-French-Russian venture in Iran's oil and gas sector. Chirac however, is the head of his state; Malott and his future, as he admitted, are determined by many others, including the 34 members of the US Congress whose wrath he may have incurred with his bold statement.

Those who have followed his progress as the US ambassador to Malaysia will not have been totally surprised by Malott's actions. When he was a new face on the Kuala Lumpur Embassy Row two years ago, Malott almost instantly sent ripples through the diplomatic world by replying through the media to statements issued by several ministers on matters concerning the US. In an interview with this newspaper earlier this year, the ambassador said that he believed in expressing his views frankly. Malott felt that he would not have been doing his job if he had not responded to the ministers' comments.

However, Malott must also realise that Malaysians had been provoked, by the 34 US Congressmen's undiplomatic gesture, into standing up and voicing their anger. These Malaysians probably felt that they would not have been good citizens if they did not speak up when their country, or their leaders, were unfairly criticised or condemned, just as good American citizens would also stand up for their country. The American or US-bashing, as Malott described the Malaysians' reaction, at the press conference on Monday, was an expression of the people's feelings. Malaysians are not anti-US, just as they are not anti-Jew. And Malaysians are certainly not going to start branding all Americans as anti-Malaysia or anti-Mahathir just because 34 Congressmen - who probably have no idea where Kuala Terengganu is (where Dr Mahathir made his statement about Mr George Soros being a Jew and Malaysia being a Muslim country) - thought they might gain political mileage by asking Dr Mahathir to quit.

The US is one of Malaysia's largest trading partners and a major source of foreign direct investment. As Dr Mahathir said, Malaysia does not wish to sever ties with the US and there is no reason to begin thinking about the possibility. Still, some tension has been created and should not be allowed to deepen. Malott knows Malaysia and its people pretty well and he should convey a clear message to the 34 congressmen that there certainly is no anti-Jewish sentiment in this country. Malaysians may not be happy with developments in the West Asian peace process, but that does not make them violently inclined towards the party resisting the process or the party brokering it. Certainly, no member of the Malaysian Parliament has ever called for anyone in Washington to step down.

Malott should keep the politicians in Washington informed since they obviously have the wrong image of Malaysia. Perhaps these congressmen should spend a few days in Malaysia now that the haze has dissappeared and

they can see with clarity. The fact that the Government accepted the presence of the Israeli cricket team at a game in Malaysia should have also been a clear indication of our tolerance. The problem is not with us: we are well exposed to the American way of life and thinking and are quite aware - without being judgemental - of its positive and negative sides. Many Americans know Malaysia and its people well and they would be doing their countrymen - or rather, Congressmen - a great favour by narrating their experiences.

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