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Marina: Malaysia, Australia have much to learn from each other

K.C. Boey in Melbourne

MALAYSIA and Australia have much to learn from each other, publisher and AIDS support advocate Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said yesterday.

Each has much that it can benefit from, working with the other, Marina said after a week-long visit that demonstrated what she believed in.

Marina, the president of the Malaysian AIDS Council, was in Melbourne where she was one of the keynote speakers at the Third International AIDS Impact Conference.

In Sydney yesterday, she launched a book offering a pictorial essay on multiculturalism in Australia and in Malaysia.

"This is what makes me optimistic about Australia, despite all the negative publicity surrounding Pauline Hanson," Marina told the New Straits Times.

Marina was reluctant to talk about the controversial independent Member of Parliament from Queensland, but she continued being asked about Hanson in interviews with the media, for which she has been sought after.

Hanson cropped up in discussions about the project Marina conceptualised and directed, called Visions: A Multicultural Exploration of Malaysia & Australia, a travelling exhibition of photographs mounted in four cities each in Malaysia and Australia.

In Australia, Visions was held up as an example of collaboration that represented a repudiation of Hanson.

"We had no such grand ambitions for Visions," said Marina. "We had no specific agenda, which is why we call it an exploration.

"It is intended as only a starting point (in a journey of understanding)."

Marina said Visions was not intended to be prescriptive nor to be seen as a counterweight to Hanson, but she understood the concern Australians had about the negative image of Australia that Hanson was provoking in Asia.

Marina said the Hanson "irritation" did not detract from the prospects for collaboration between Malaysia and Australia on her two pet projects - multiculturalism and AIDS prevention.

Malaysia, with its established multicultural society, had lessons for Australia. In AIDS prevention, Malaysia could learn from Australia.

Non-governmental organisations were well developed in Australia, and on social issues such as AIDS prevention, much depended on NGOs.

"Australia can export its expertise," said Marina. "But even here, Malaysia has something to offer.

"AIDS prevention in Australia is very much directed at mainstream Anglo-Saxon Australians. We in Asia can help with our experience on how to work with minority groups."

Marina said cultural attitudes towards AIDS were different with people from different communities. Collaboration was a two-way process. This is where Malaysia and Australia could benefit from the experience of the other.

Visions was a project Marina conceived two years ago, inspired by her Eyes on Asean exhibition.

It consists a travelling exhibition of about 85 photographs taken by three photographers each from Malaysia and Australia, in each other's country.

The exhibition, launched in Melbourne last November, has been

simultaneously mounted in Malaysia and Australia. In Malaysia, it has been displayed in Kuching, Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Lumpur and Penang.

In Australia, after Melbourne, the exhibition travelled to Adelaide and Canberra. It opens in Sydney on July 7.

The book Marina launched is an extension of the exhibition, with the photographs augmented by two essays written by two keen observers of cross-cultural relations in the region.

The essays follow the same concept as that for the photographers. The essay on multiculturalism in Australia is written by Datuk A. Kadir Jasin, New Straits Times group editor, and the one on Malaysia is written by Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of The Australian.

The photographers were Malaysians Amri Ginang, Suan I. Lim and S.C. Shekhar, and Australians Lorrie Graham, Emmanuel T. Santos and Peter Solness.

(END)