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## National day celebrations

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THE summer months of June, July and August appear to be the months for several countries to celebrate their respective national day. Among the noteworthy national days which fall in July are the American Independence Day and the French National Day. Our own day of independence is in August, as is Indonesia's and Singapore's.

Pakistan and India both obtained independence in August but they celebrate it in different months. Pakistan's is held in March and is called Resolution Day, while India celebrates its Republic Day in January.

India's Republic Day coincides with Australia's day of independence, called Australia Day. In many capitals of the world, the ambassadors of India and Australia will agree between themselves which country will celebrate their national day on the actual date and which on a subsequent day in order to avoid a reception clash.

The British, as usual, have been most practical in celebrating their "National Day". British ambassadors in diplomatic missions choose either April which is the Queen Elizabeth's actual birthdate or June which is her official birthday. With few exceptions, in non-temperate countries, the British ambassador will naturally choose to hold the reception in April rather than in the hot month of June.

The recent French National Day reception in Kuala Lumpur had extra significance. At the reception, video tapes of the military parade held in honour of our visiting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir and in the presence of President Chirac, were shown to the guests. The visit also coincided with France's national day celebrations.

In Malaysia, it is a nice tradition to have a small ceremony with a Malaysian Minister or Deputy Minister representing the Government to exchange a toast with the ambassador. This is followed by the playing of each country's national anthem. In many countries there is no ceremony what-so-ever.

In Pakistan there is a photo opportunity where the minister representing the country and the ambassador would jointly cut the cake. The most lavish national day receptions are normally held by the Gulf countries. There the guests will find variety of food such as roast lamb and kebabs and other sweet dishes and fruits.

I recall a national day reception in Hanoi, Vietnam in the Cold War era. The Soviet Union held a large reception which was attended by almost the entire Vietnamese Cabinet including the Prime Minister. Seated around the Soviet Ambassador were ambassadors of other socialist countries.

The reception began with the ambassador making his speech which went on for considerable time and then translated into Vietnamese which went on for an even longer time! Then the Vietnamese ministerial host replied in another lengthy speech and they began to toast each other. It was only much later that the guests could get to the caviar and other dishes, after eyeing them for some time. After the lengthy speeches you would forgive the guests for their unrestrained attack on the food that night!

In diplomatic missions in Europe there is practically no national day celebration (partly because it is costly). Even when a national day reception is held, the occasion is business-like and guests come and go at will and there is no formality.

The French National Day with its parade along Champs-Elysees can be considered as a proto-type national day parade. Many countries hold

military parades on their national day. Both Pakistan and India have impressive national day parades. The Americans on the 4th of July have a big day of celebration, especially in Washington DC, where there is normally a fireworks display.

I recall a visit to Hawaii on the 4th of July. There was a national day parade as usual, and one of the features was a band comprising a Buddhist group brought in from Los Angeles. At the head of the parade was a filmstar who has strong ties with the Buddhist fraternity. The Americans always have a novel way of celebrating things. However, in recent years, independence day receptions are held on a modest scale.

Among the Asean countries, the Indonesians normally put up cultural performances which include a gamelan orchestra. Other Asean countries including Malaysia occasionally have orchids specially flown in to be given to guests. On a number of occasions, when I hosted our national day reception, the Bunga Telor, painstakingly made by our women's association, were given to guests with much appreciation.

With the end of the Cold War, celebrations of the national day at home and abroad has been streamlined. Brass bands associated with national celebrations have become a thing of the past. New Zealand occasionally has Maori dancers performing at their functions. Sometimes a national day is celebrated with selected cultural shows. Exhibitions of modern art and handicraft are considered more trendy.