

30 MAR 1998

Ambassador

DR RAJMAH HUSSAIN: MALAYSIA'S NEW AMBASSADOR TO FRANCE

By: Salmy Hashim

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Bernama) -- "She's a dynamite! And dynamite usually comes in small packages!" says Peter Hickman, a Washington media consultant, when asked to describe Dr Rajmah Hussain, Malaysia's Ambassador-designate to France.

And that's how Washingtonians will remember this petite diplomat who has served as Malaysia's Deputy Chief of Mission in Washington for the past four years.

This career foreign service officer has worked quietly and relentlessly, assisting the ambassador in promoting Malaysian-American interests and sometimes helping to iron out the stubborn wrinkles in an otherwise excellent bilateral relations.

After 22 years in Wisma Putra, Dr Rajmah has finally won her prize - an ambassadorial position in France.

No mean feat considering that this is one of the high-profile G-7 country which has very good relations with Malaysia.

She hates to admit it, but she will be the first female ambassador of Malaysia to France.

"I feel honoured by the trust the government places in me. It's a big responsibility, and I hope I'll be able to deliver," she said at an interview over lunch at the "Reliable Source" restaurant of the National Press Club here.

She will have fond memories of the prestigious club, which once refused to fly the Malaysian flag on its marble-floored lobby.

Being a new member of the club, Dr Rajmah had wanted to present a Malaysian flag when she did not see any but was thoroughly shocked when told that they could not fly the Malaysian flag, citing "lack of press freedom in that country."

Following a flurry of letters, phone calls and a meeting, the flag was finally accepted and presented in a quiet ceremony to then club president, Richard Sammon, last year.

She looked for the Malaysian flag again as she descended the stairs leading to the lobby. Took one last picture next to the flag, and pleased that Hickman, also a committee member of the club, had promised to be the "guardian angel" over Malaysia's pride.

The incident may seem minor to some. To Dr Rajmah it is a serious mission that cannot be taken lightly.

The Malaysian flag is an important symbol for Malaysia. To have it flying at a place where the world's presidents, prime ministers and newsmakers have spoken and continue to speak is even more crucial.

"The greatest satisfaction I get from this job is serving my nation. It's not something that I can calculate in dollars and cents. I take great pride in serving my country," she said.

What is her impression of Washington and Americans in general?

"I'm happy to note that Malaysia-US relations is on a warm footing. However, differences between the two countries occur from time to time because of differences in our values and perceptions on a variety of issues, including human rights and democracy," she said.

However, visits by US officials, Congressmen and their staffers, as well as non-governmental organisation representatives to Malaysia have usually softened their rigid stance on prickly issues.

"That's why, as embassy officials, we try to encourage as many visits

to Malaysia as possible. They usually return home to the States with a completely different perception of Malaysia. They have greater respect for our people, our achievements and our economic development," she said.

In 1994, right after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made a working visit to Washington, Dr Rajmah, as charge d'affaires ad interim, received an invitation to a diplomatic reception at the White House.

What struck her was President Bill Clinton's attention to detail. In a brief conversation, the president spoke warmly of the prime minister's visit to the White House and of the need to forge closer US-Malaysia relations.

Dr Rajmah believed that US-Malaysia relations, while at times thorny, have become closer under the Clinton administration.

US officials, who saw the two leaders during closed meetings at the APEC leaders summit in Vancouver last November described the Clinton-Mahathir friendship as "very warm."

As the DCM in Washington, Dr Rajmah has travelled extensively throughout the United States meeting with officials, businessmen, and participated in seminars where she untiringly promoted Malaysia's interests in the US.

Douglas Hartwick, Director for the Southeast Asia Office at the State Department, who served as Economic Counsellor at the US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur from 1990-93, describes Dr Rajmah as a lady with a nice Malay charm.

"She is also quite articulate in describing sensitive issues, not afraid to be frank for the sake of clarity," he said.

Hartwick also appreciated Dr Rajmah's style because by talking to her about bilateral issues, "I could get a good sense of how the Malaysian government views the problem. Good or bad, she embodies the sensitivities of the Malaysian government."

As for Dr Rajmah, she looked forward to building on the close relations between Malaysia and France.

She succeeds ambassador Mohamad Haron who is retiring.-- BERNAMA  
SH rn