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Year-ender (Foreign)  
MALAYSIA IN THE EYES OF THE STORM

By: E. Sivabalan

KUALA LUMPUR: By any yardstick, 1998 has been a hectic year for the Foreign Ministry when the nation went on "trial" in the eyes of the world.

Whether warranted or not, the foreign media in particular have put the spotlight on the warts and pimples on the otherwise fair and tranquil face of the country.

It was also a year of ups and downs for the diplomats, especially the top diplomat in the person of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The ouster, arrest and the on-going trial of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and his "black eye" triggered a wave of protests not only from within, but also, from outside the country, particularly from the West and the international media.

For them, Anwar was not the only one in the dock but Malaysia as well.

Anwar who is currently being tried on four counts of corrupt practice of using his position to interfere with police investigations into allegations of sexual misconduct against him, had claimed that he was beaten after being arrested on Sept 20. He later appeared in court with an apparent black eye.

For Foreign Ministry deputy secretary-general Datuk N.Parameswaran, the year "has been a hectic year indeed."

He said Wisma Putra took immediate steps to keep Malaysian missions abroad posted on the latest developments in the country so that the missions could explain the real situation to foreign governments.

"We have tried to reply to all the allegations in the international media," he said.

Parameswaran said Malaysia's election to the United Nations Security Council non-permanent seat for the 1999-2000 term recently was a "plus development" for the country's foreign policy.

"It is an international endorsement, particularly against the domestic situation. We were glad that we came out top," Parameswaran said.

Kuala Lumpur had secured the highest votes with 174 out of the 176 cast, followed by Argentina (171), Namibia (167), Canada (131) and the Netherlands (122).

In an immediate response, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said Malaysia's election to the Security Council reflected the world's recognition of the significant role played by the country in the international fora.

Parameswaran also said the fact that Malaysia had successfully hosted two major world events -- the 16th Commonwealth Games in September and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit the following month -- was proof of "Malaysia Boleh."

Malaysia won praises from around the world for playing almost a perfect host to some 5,000 athletes and officials from 70 countries at the Kuala Lumpur Games, the second biggest sporting event after the Olympics.

The following month, Kuala Lumpur received another group of VIPs, the APEC leaders. Although much smaller in number but certainly bigger in importance, the presence of many world leaders here last November again tested to the limit Malaysia's organisational capabilities.

The two world events went on smoothly and almost hitch-free, thanks to the hardwork put in by Malaysians from all walks of life.

"What was happening in Malaysia did not cloud our international

posture," Parameswaran said.

The success in securing a Security Council seat and the hosting of the events came as a relief for Malaysia amid the onslaught by the Western media over the Anwar case and the illegal demonstrations held by Anwar's supporters under the so-called "Reformasi" banner.

Then came Al Gore, the US vice president, with his infamous remarks which angered Malaysians from all walks of life and which will be remembered for life.

Gore's reference to the people behind the "reformasi" movement as "the brave people of Malaysia" unleashed a storm of protests from many Malaysians, who were already perturbed by the bloody riots, arson and rape in Indonesia which, like Malaysia, is reeling from the ravages of the economic recession.

It culminated in Foreign Ministry Undersecretary for Americas Datuk John Nuek summoning the US ambassador to Malaysia, John Malott, to lodge an official complaint against Gore's insensitive remarks which also violated common courtesy between a host and a guest in an Asian society.

While the Western media continue to focus on the Anwar trial, Malaysia moved ahead, forging closer ties with other countries, particularly with its neighbours.

In the case of Singapore, after months and probably years of confrontation, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore decided in October to work toward improving bilateral ties.

Malaysia-Singapore ties took a turn for the better when Dr Mahathir and his Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong met at the KL International Airport in Sepang last Nov 5.

The rest was history. "It ended on a good note," said Parameswaran.

Dr Mahathir, the prime mover behind Malaysia's success in handling the economic crisis, also made trips to Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore and Brunei in just one month last February to discuss the region's economic turmoil and in March, he was in Myanmar for the same reason.

The prime minister also visited Germany and attended the Asia-Europe meeting (Asem) in London in March where he spoke on the need to regulate currency trading and a review of the international financial regime.

Dr Mahathir was also in Sudan in May to strengthen South-South cooperation. He also took part in the Group of 15 (G-15) meeting in Cairo, Egypt.

And in June, he made a working visit to Japan. However, the prime minister had to skip the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Durban, South Africa, to concentrate on domestic economic matters.

Dr Mahathir capped his overseas trip this year with a four-day trip to Vietnam to attend the Sixth Asean Summit in Hanoi this month.

The year also saw many foreign leaders visiting Malaysia. Among them were Britain's Queen Elizabeth, the presidents of Eritrea and Djibouti, South African deputy president Thabo Mbeki and King Mswati III of Swaziland.

Malaysia also voiced out its concern over the situation in Kosovo and the missile attack on Iraq by the United States and Britain.

Kuala Lumpur also fought for the rights of the Palestinians and supported Cambodia's admission into ASEAN at the Hanoi Summit.

What is left to be seen now is Malaysia's call for the regulation of currency speculation that is seen as the primary cause of the economic blight sweeping across the East Asian landscape.

Like its proponent Dr Mahathir said, it would take the ponderous global machinery a few years to decide and work out the regulations, the proposal of which is gaining endorsements from many leaders and countries of the world. -- BERNAMA

ES KGO