

18/01/1998

Jabbar: Power of arrest needed to root out errant traders

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BEFORE he joined the civil service and became the bane of unscrupulous traders, Datuk Abdul Jabbar Kamin had already logged 12 years in the Royal Malaysian Police Force, attaining the position of inspector at Bukit Aman.

When he left the service to join the then Ministry of Trade and Industry in 1974, he never looked back.

Almost never.

"About 10 days after I had left, someone from Bukit Aman rang me up to tell me the Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Abdul Rahman Hashim had been shot and killed by communist terrorists," said Jabbar, now 54.

"I was so shocked. The country lost one of its most outstanding personalities that day. I had known him personally, and maybe for a moment, I wished I was back in the force."

But Jabbar chose to stay where he was. The switch had been made and his destiny, he believed, was set.

"The police force made a man out me. It taught me how to be a disciplinarian, to be self-resilient and to be loyal to my superiors. But in the world of the civil service, I found that discipline was reciprocal, like respect.

"It could not just be demanded, so as a leader, you had to lead by example."

What followed was 24 years of steady vigilance over commodity supplies and price levels, of raids and calming consumer panic, of battling dishonest traders and of sticking to the law.

Jabbar quickly understood that hard-hearted enforcement, the kind that would shut a trader down with the first offence, would be drastic and shortsighted, depriving the economy of business.

"Sometimes you hit hard against repeat offenders to set an example, but other times you use persuasion. If you just shut someone down, you deprive him of his only source of income and then the next time he may not earn honestly.

"Most traders would respond positively, but they never seem to pass the information on what to do and what not to do down to assistants or family members helping out. And new traders are always coming in."

In all his years in enforcement, Jabbar noted two chronic problems that stubbornly refused to be stamped out: the sale of fake medicines, and more recently in the last 10 years, intellectual property piracy.

"Between the two, piracy is a more serious concern because we are talking about multi-million dollar articles.

"But enforcement officials don't have the power of arrest. We could go in and seize all the goods, but the brains behind it, that person can walk away."

Jabbar lobbied for powers of arrest to be bestowed on enforcement officers, but that was one thing he was not able to accomplish by the time he opted for early retirement recently.

"I was frustrated," he admitted. "A lot of man hours were spent, but at the end of the day, you effectively netted zero."

Although no enforcement officer died during raids under Jabbar's time at the helm, things didn't always proceed smoothly.

Some officers were chased out by irate traders wielding parangs, others were abused and sworn at. Work, to say the least, wasn't always pleasant.

Their chief, however, told them that someone had to do the job, and

since it was them, they had to do it the best they could.

Jabbar himself didn't escape the traders' vengeful wrath. He received a steady stream of threatening phone calls and letters throughout his career, culminating in an attack not on him, but his wife.

"Some years ago after we had conducted a series of successful raids, some men with parangs chased my wife into the house. Luckily, there were a lot of people in the house at the time and the men ran away."

Despite the dangers, Jabbar's family never asked him to resign. He himself believes his wife's escape was not luck, but fate. God decides when you live or die, he says, and the only thing you have to do is live life the best you can.

Jabbar may be out of the enforcement game now, but when asked to cast an expert eye over the present commodity situation, he has a few wry words of advice for the Malaysian consumer: quit panicking.

"Whenever there's a rumbling about supply, people panic. Traders like panic. When people do that, they allow themselves to be exploited and will continue to pay even if the prices have gone up tenfold.

"Malaysian consumers are intelligent but are easily influenced by externalities. The Government has done everything it could, but the slack must be taken up by the consumer."

He suggested turning the tables on price hikers by joining consumers' associations and then calling for a boycott the minute prices start to skyrocket beyond reason.

"If you want to fight back, what do you need? Strength, logistics and a good general. Right now there's nothing much the associations can do except shout."

Jabbar served under a number of political heavyweights in his nearly quarter of a century-long stint with the Government, including former Prime Minister Tun Hussein Onn ("I learnt so much from him."), Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad ("A very firm man, full of ideas and always with a very futuristic outlook) and Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz ("If all Malaysians could think like her, we would be the most progressive nation in the world").

Now that he has left the corridors of civil service, Jabbar has made yet another switch, this time to the corporate world.

He has spent the last week learning the ropes of his new job as chief executive of Permodalan Negeri Selangor Berhad, based in Shah Alam. It's a new opportunity he faces with relish.

"I hope that with the knowledge, experience and contacts I have gained from my last two jobs, I will be able to do well here. But age is catching up with me," he laughed ruefully.

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