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Observer's attack a cheap shot at sensationalism

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THE fact that the Observer newspaper has decided to launch another attack on Malaysia hardly comes as a surprise. Indeed, the only thing surprising about the Observer's recent salvo was that it came so late; after all, the newspaper has been engaged in an all-out campaign against a host of Asian and Muslim countries for some time now.

In this respect we need only to remind ourselves of the simple fact that the Observer was one of the newspapers in Britain which saw fit to condemn Muslims and the Muslim world in toto after the bombing of the FBI headquarters in Oklahoma in the United States some years ago.

When the facts came to light and it was discovered that the bombing was the work of a group of white racial supremacists, the Observer, like the rest of the Western press, chose to keep quiet about its part in demonising the Muslims of the world.

Such is the moral character of this newspaper which claims to be the "defender of the truth".

Another self-appointed "defender of the truth" is Britain's Guardian newspaper, which has of late taken a keen interest in the affairs of Indonesia, Malaysia and the rest of Asean.

As always, such "concern" comes at the point of a barbed pen which distorts the picture that it tries to draw in the process.

The Guardian recently featured a report on the visit to Southeast Asia by Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. The paper's reporter, who followed slavishly in the footsteps of the Chancellor, noted how Asians seemed to bow before the presence of this British politician as if he were some munificent white god that had descended from on high.

But the magical charm of the Chancellor's tour was interrupted only when he set foot on Malaysian soil and was told that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was too busy to see him. The Guardian reporter dutifully recorded in a sarcastic tone that the Malaysian PM was not inclined to "receive this representative of the Evil West". (The thought that the PM may have had other more important things to do obviously did not occur to the reporter).

However this sarcastic thrust was blunted by the Guardian's own incompetence. Having cast Dr Mahathir in an unfavourable light, it tried to juxtapose him against his more "moderate" deputy, "Ibrahim Anwar" (sic). Even a child in kindergarten would know by now that the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia's real name is Anwar Ibrahim, and not vice-versa!

The so-called "defenders of truth", such as the Guardian and Observer, would thus do well by serving as the guardians of grammar and spelling first.

How should Malaysia and Malaysians react to this sort of verbiage disguised as reportage? Well, a modicum of intelligence and introspection would come in handy at this point. We need to consider the broader socio-economic and political context within which these attacks are taking place.

The Observer, like many other newspapers in Britain, is in a state of crisis. The paper's circulation figures are unpredictable and in the end it is market sentiment which decides what comes on the news and what kind of news will sell.

In a country where sensational news items such as the death of Princess

Diana and UFOs sell better than stories about how the British government has allowed British companies like Sandlines to sell arms and rent mercenaries abroad, it is hardly surprising that sensational stories about the bizarre and exotic customs of the East tend to go down well with a jaded readership at home.

This is reflected in the contents of some of the better newspapers in Britain as well. The Guardian, for example, has significantly cut its number of features from abroad. Once, the paper boasted of having a page devoted solely to African and Third World issues. Today, it features a page devoted to the affairs of the US instead.

To make matters worse, papers such as the Guardian and Observer have begun to "dumb down" their coverage of foreign affairs to appeal to a broader spectrum of readers who seem to crave stories about tortures, killings, bizarre and outlandish rituals and exotic diets of foreigners.

The lurid and sensational reporting that has come from papers such as these are thus merely part and parcel of a broader scenario, where the British press is slowly coming to terms with the painful reality that their halcyon days have long gone by.

Resting on their laurels, they pine for the days when British newspapers were worthy of the name and conveniently overlook the fact that, today, even the pages of the Guardian and Observer are used to wrap fish and chips.

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