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Of rocks and hard places

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WHILST now overshadowed by the continuing riots in Indonesia, the March camp riots in Semenyih and the subsequent Press and governmental reaction are worrying not only as an isolated incident but also as a hint of things to come. With so many differing crises (economic, environmental-air and water, foreign confidence) upon our collective doorstep, effective crisis management, both in terms of the events and shaping perception of the events is ever more crucial. The events of the final days of March precipitated a failure on both fronts.

The British Sunday paper, The Observer, ran a front page piece on the riots quoting several escaped refugees who claimed that the riots were sparked off by some of their number vomiting blood. The Observer joined in the refugees' speculation that the vomiting had been caused by sedatives being added to the camp inhabitants' food. This sparked off a rumour of poisoning which in turn precipitated the riots. The Observer, which in association with the BBC also made a TV documentary on the subject, printed several pictures of the tightly bound corpses of refugees who had died from gunshot wounds.

The incident and the reportage sparked off condemnation from human rights groups and renewed requests from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Amnesty International and Western journalists to inspect the camps. These requests continue to be refused. The reportage also prompted a powerful reaction from Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir: "They tell lies, they suppress news about us and yet they accuse us. It's about time our Press tells the truth about them."

The Observer ran another front-page article, repeating in equal detail the incidents and its theories on it. The paper hints at gruesome human rights abuses, and lists with cold relish all the other troubles, from the smog, to the economy, water shortage and the threat to the Commonwealth Games, facing our country. The article ends with a description of the tightly bound corpses and the innuendo-laden question: "Why bother to handcuff a corpse?" Revealingly, it uses the term "regime" without further elaboration to describe the Malaysian Government.

The Observer's reaction does not seem to be in the best spirit of objective journalism. One unpleasant camp riot does not a despotism make, and there does seem to be a slight taste of malice in the reportage. Equally though, I don't think we helped ourselves by reacting to the accusations by lashing out at the foreign Press.

To compound allegations of human rights abuses with Press censorship is to invite adverse publicity. At a time when there is quite enough bad news in the East to sell Western papers it makes little sense for us to be providing additional cannon fodder to blast away at investor confidence and our dwindling tourist trade.

Justified though the anger and frustration that Malaysians and their leaders may feel at being bombarded by Western criticism, two important distinctions need to be borne high in mind. Firstly the Western Press are not the same people as Western governments. Papers like The Observer have a long tradition of objective journalism.

They will expose what they see as corruption or cover-up in their own countries as quickly as they will that which occurs overseas. They legitimately see the investigative journalism as a responsibility to those who do not have a voice.

Secondly even if we feel they are biased, we should not allow our anger at them to prevent us searching for the truth in difficult situations ourselves. If we must shoot the messenger, the least we can do is heed the message.

Given that the fact of the clash, and the death toll is not in dispute, it should be uncontroversial to lay out the possibilities as three mutually exclusive scenarios:

* There is no truth to The Observer's conjectures. No sedatives or poisons were used, no handcuffed prisoners were shot and no human rights abuses took place. The officials reacted to the riots according to acceptable guidelines, and the deaths, whilst tragic, are not murders or the result of officially sanctioned brutality.

* Human rights abuses did take place, but these were the result of a few camp wardens acting independently without official authority or sanction.

* Human rights abuses did take place and these are government policy. In the first scenario, then the most obvious course of action would be to throw open the camp doors to the UN and Amnesty and show the world that we are capable of dealing with a difficult problem humanely. Neither the ban on the papers nor the denial of access to the camps makes sense in this scenario, and should be rethought.

In the second situation, there should be an independent inquiry and those responsible should be disciplined.

It is not an easy job, but all the more important that those who perform it should be aware of the need to carry it out as painlessly and justly as possible.

Certainly there is nothing to be gained by our leaders compromising their own integrity by defending indefensible actions.

The third scenario is nearly too awful to contemplate, and all the more reason to discredit with clear open objective facts those who are contemplating it.

The difficulties within the camps are but tiny operational difficulties compared to the moral and logistical issues that the refugee crisis is precipitating.

The truth is that our economy with unemployment rising can ill afford the strain of two million out-of-work immigrants who are already here, still less the boat loads more who are attempting (often futile and sometimes fatal) covert landings every day.

But, by chucking them out and since the official government name given to the repatriation exercise is "Operation GO AWAY", I presume that euphemisms are not considered either tactful or necessary though we cast them into a turmoil both political and economic far worse than our own.

That decision will not only cost many of them their freedom or lives, but also reneges on promises implied and expectations encouraged by the boom years of tolerant and blind-eyed welcome to our Asean neighbours.

Despite the clear economic dictates of the situation, sentiment on the ground is mixed. Many hold strong feelings for the Indonesians.

Many will have relatives who face starvation and in some cases persecution if they were made to return. It is a difficult problem and one partly of our own creation.

Between the rock and the hard place it may be that casualties are inevitable, but at least we can try and ensure that our national integrity, reputation and basic humanitarian principles are not among them.

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