

06/06/1998

Venturing into uncharted land

Abdul Razak Ahmad

"TO boldly go where no one has gone before." Quoting Captain James T. Kirk to describe Asia's journey of self-discovery may seem irrelevant, but in the case of the recent student conference in Kuala Lumpur entitled "Asia in Transition: Beyond the Miracle", it proved most apt - and then some!

The quote, used by ISIS chairman and CEO Tan Sri Dr Noordin Sopiee, hit home for some delegates, among them Christine Susamma, 22.

An Indonesian Chinese university student, Susamma chose to attend despite the fact that her family in Jakarta was in the thick of the Indonesian riots just days before the conference started.

Angry mobs forced Susamma and her family out of their house, where they were set upon. Susamma recalled that if it weren't for the quick intervention of neighbours, her family would have been killed.

"The conference has given me hope," she said. "Before I came here, I had more or less decided to flee Indonesia. Now I know I must return. The things I have learnt have given me a better understanding of what I have to do to ensure those riots never occur again."

For Susamma and over 270 other delegates, the imperative is clear. In the aftermath of the Indonesian riots, the current economic slowdown and India and Pakistan's tit-for-tat nuclear tests, the world is becoming an increasingly difficult place in which to live.

The four-day conference at the Putra World Trade Centre was the perfect opportunity for them to seek answers and let their hopes be heard - the voice of the world's young adults, youths who are leaders of the future.

Apart from Noordin, conference sessions were led by noted speakers such as Deputy Primary Industries Minister Datuk Hishamuddin Hussein, Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir and New Straits Times associate editor Rose Ismail.

Kudos must go to the organising committee for a smooth and well-handled conference. Consisting mainly of university students and young professionals, the committee's professionalism resulted in what was probably one of the best-organised conferences ever held in Malaysia.

Delegates' questions, debates and discussions centred on the concept of Asian values and their role in the development and - currently - economic problems afflicting the region.

"There is no such thing as Asian values," declared Hishamuddin, pointing out that core "Asian" values have "at one time or another been an integral strength of European or American society".

Debunking the concept of Asian values, calling them as mythical as the "Asian miracle", Hishamuddin called upon delegates to seize upon recent regional events as a "rare opportunity to rethink the kind of economic development models to adopt for the future".

Citing the need for a balance in this future model, between sustained economic growth and a strong measure of social justice, Hishamuddin called this impending new Asian economic model "Asian realism."

With intellectuals predicting an impending clash of civilisations between East and West, Noordin spoke of this new model and asked: "Why not celebrate the differences between us, and pick and choose the best from among each of our cultures and civilisations, to create a 'feast of civilisations'?"

Delegates were taken on a tour of the Multimedia Super Corridor, to provide a glimpse of the future. Which, apart from the technological

aspect, is basically not very pleasant, as pointed out by the panellists for the session on globalisation and its social and environmental impact.

Speaking of the challenges faced by the individual within the global village, Rose said: "I think we forget, when all is said and done, it comes right down to that one individual."

Like Susamma, who made a request: "Please dedicate your article to all those who died during the riots."

To whom, though, shall we impart the insights gained in the cloistered atmosphere of the student conference?

That night, as delegates were deep in noble thoughts of boldly going where no-one has gone before, came the answer:

In the darkness right outside the confines of the bright conference hall, daredevils astride motorcycles, looking to be barely in their twenties, were turning the roads around the PWTC into a makeshift racetrack and tearing around at breakneck speed - right into a massive traffic police operation!

Offenders were promptly arrested, handcuffed, and boldly taken by the police where none of the delegates have been before: traffic police headquarters in Jalan Bandar, where they were forced to squat in the parking lot, facing the prospect of a hefty fine and jail sentence for reckless riding.

I notice their bowed heads, and the cowed silence of these forgotten youths spoke more loudly than all that was uttered in the well-lit conference rooms of the intellectual elite.

So much for boldly going where none has been before. So much for getting together to discuss making the world a better place. Yes, so much.

(END)