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Vital to keep students abroad well informed

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HARVARD: Information, and especially the correct information, is of vital importance. Misinformation can cause untold damage. It is thus important that Malaysians abroad - especially students - are kept well informed about the situation at home.

Students are a vulnerable lot. In the absence of information about what is going on at home, they can be very easily and adversely influenced by peer pressure and various interest groups.

The economic and currency crisis affecting the countries in East Asia and its causes have made headline news and generated numerous analyses in the media abroad. The US media has had a field day with their own interpretation of the crisis.

Asian companies are said to be in dire straits, the leadership is "corrupt" and nepotism as well as crony capitalism are named as being among the main causes of the crisis.

Students who are repeatedly bombarded with negative reports of the crisis as well as the various analyses and interpretations of the US media will inevitably be tempted to believe in the Western explanations for the crisis.

There are some therefore, who may blame the leadership of the Asian countries for the crisis. Never mind that there may be other valid reasons or even the fact that in an increasingly globalised world much of the activities influencing developing countries are actually determined elsewhere.

The students will then blame their own governments and leaders back home for the current problems and hardships. They will join the chorus of people asking for drastic changes, as has happened in Indonesia.

Being thousands of miles away and having limited contact with sources of information from home, the students are likely to believe what they hear and read, especially when the same incorrect information is repeatedly fed to them and there is no alternative source much less contact with those from home.

The constant and repeated bombardment of misinformation could lead to students believing that the foreign media reports are indeed true.

In addition, there is also peer pressure from other students and groups to believe in the western interpretation of developments at home.

It is therefore important that students, and especially those abroad, are kept informed and updated on developments at home.

Casual meetings with Ministers, diplomats and senior governments officials, who are in the know about what is going on, do make a difference.

These meetings can also be a source of comfort to students as they will know that they are not being neglected or ignored. They will feel reassured and know that their welfare and future is being taken care of.

A meeting of Malaysian students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston, with Malaysia's Special Envoy to the United Nations Datuk Abdullah Ahmad, was one such case. It offered the students an opportunity to clarify the information that they had read in the newspapers and magazines and heard over the radio and the television networks.

Not surprisingly most of them wanted to know what was going on at home as a result of the currency crisis. They had heard and read about the

foreign reasons for the crisis.

Among the questions that they raised included the alleged differences between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the mishandling of the economy, the rise of crony capitalism in the country and the need for drastic changes before the economic situation can improve.

They were happy to hear an explanation, first hand, on what was happening at home. Despite the small turnout at the meeting, the opportunity afforded to those who were present enabled them to clarify the burning questions that they had.

It was one of the rare treats for students at MIT to have a face to face conversation with someone who could provide the latest on what was happening at home and the measures being taken to overcome the difficulties.

Boston, New York and Washington are usually on the itinerary of most Malaysian visitors and it is thus easier to reach the students in these cities.

It is equally important however, that those who are in colleges and universities which are off the beaten track are not neglected. They may have even fewer opportunities to meet Malaysians from home and be informed about what is going on and what is being done.

They may continue to believe that nothing is going right and that they (the students) need to do something to put it right. They can thus be instigated by interested parties to put pressure and even demonstrate as happened in Indonesia.

The importance of keeping in touch with the students abroad, through direct contact and other means, cannot be over-emphasised. It is even more vital during times of difficulties than it is during good times.

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