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Americans need to be educated about their own country

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THE US Congress sub committee held a Kangaroo court, allegedly to "educate the American public" about Malaysia. The topic of the "hearing" was, "Malaysia: Assessing the Mahathir Agenda".

While not many Americans know very much about the rest of the world - only some 10 per cent of Americans have an international passport - they do need to be educated about the rest of the world. But equally, Americans need to be educated about their own country.

Malaysia after all is a small developing country, just south of Thailand and north of Singapore. Thus, the Congress sub-committee found it essential to "educate" their fellow Americans about a developing country that is being ruled by a Prime Minister who is a thorn in their side does not do their bidding.

But while any attempt to educate the uneducated and ignorant is a noble gesture, it is important that those who are being "educated" are given the correct information and those who undertake the task of educating do so sincerely and not provide half truths and misinformation. A greater disservice is done by the "educators" if they choose to deliberately teach the wrong things and provide totally misconstrued and wrong "facts". Even as Americans are being "educated" about a developing country that lies on the opposite side of the globe, it is equally important that Congress educate Americans about their own country and the failings of their own Government. There are many issues that Americans need enlightenment and education on.

The US, which continues to preach to the rest of the world on a host of issues - human rights, labour, the environment, freedom of information, trade liberalisation - is guilty of not signing, acceding or ratifying some 150 international agreements including several human rights protocols and conventions. Some of these protocols had been hammered out and agreed to decades ago.

The US continues to use its muscle and "crowbar", to use Carla Hill, the former US Trade Secretary words, to prise open markets. The US regularly insists upon there being transparency, but Washington itself has numerous restrictions and barriers in place and in the way of the free flow of goods and labour.

It may come as a surprise to many - perhaps even to those who took part in the Kangaroo Court which tried Malaysia last week - that Washington has, among others, not ratified the Protocol amending the International Convention relating to Economic Statistics which was signed in Geneva on December 14 1928.

The Malaysian Government has been accused of "controlling" the media. The US first amendment is often quoted to prove the freedom accorded to the press. It may thus come as a surprise to many that with regard to international "Freedom of Information", the US has yet to ratify, or accede the "Convention on the International Right of Correction".

The US, which preaches human rights to the rest of the world, is yet to ratify at least eight conventions and protocols relating to human rights. These include the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women"; International Convention against Apartheid in Sports; International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families".

In trying to "educate" Americans about Malaysia, Ralph Boyce, the Deputy

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs told the sub-committee of "our fundamental values". Malaysia is an independent nation with its own laws and democratically elected government. It has its own "fundamental values" and has no intention or plans to follow the "US' fundamental values".

Another "educator", Linda Lim, a Singaporean, claimed that "hot money" was fueling the stock market and added that Malaysia "remains largely shunned by longer term 'value investors'".

With the levy imposed on short term money, why would investors bring in "hot money" or short term funds and pay the 30 per cent tax to take the money out? Since February 15, 1999 some RM3 billion made their way into Malaysia. The fact that funds are coming in despite the levy, shows that these are long term investments and certainly not "hot money" as Lim claimed.

British Telecoms, and a number of other world renowned and recognised names, have increased their investments in Malaysia and these are not short term and are certainly longer term "value investors". Foreign direct investors have not been discouraged by the selective capital controls as Lim would have members of the sub-committee believe.

Much of the information that was provided at the "hearing" was biased and reflected a lack of understanding of the actual situation in the country and the latest developments.

The most balanced testimony to the sub-committee was the written statement by Ernest Z. Bower, President of the US-Association of South-East Asian Nations Business Council, who was in Kuala Lumpur recently and spent a week here. But unfortunately he was not in the committee chamber to answer any questions that may have arisen.

No Malaysian was invited, even though the main issue was Malaysia. Is it because it was assumed that Malaysians do not know their own country and that others are better informed about Malaysia. One cannot but suspect that it was a session to "misinform" and not "educate" as the committee claimed.

The testimony of Douglas H. Paal, director of the Asia Pacific Policy Centre and a former National Security Council's Asian Affairs senior director was perhaps by far the most biased.

In his testimony, Paal recommended that "for the next several years ... the US maintain a correct, but cool relationship with the Mahathir Government," adding that "His (Dr Mahathir) age and the underlying social and political turbulence of Malaysia suggest broadening the base of American contacts and interests in that country against the probability of significant political change".

He spoke of "massive demonstrations in the streets of Malaysia", "controls that were imposed on the same day he (Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim) was sacked" and of "the tendency to focus on our (American) levels of crime or social problems which has left a distorted image among many in Malaysia".

The average Malaysian is certainly better informed about the US than the average American is about Malaysia. The "education" that Paal and his "team" provided Americans has definitely given their own countrymen an even more "distorted image" about Malaysia.

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