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No short cut to nurturing good, effective diplomats

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FROM grand dinners to death threats, from hostage to hero. These are just some of the things that a Malaysian diplomat goes through.

You hover above the corridors of power one moment and tremble nervously at the hands of rebel guerillas the next. Life and death negotiations don't only occur in plush boardrooms. And you have to be on the ball all the time. It just comes with the job.

It is, therefore, crucial diplomats are well-equipped, all-round to be able to weather the storms.

"A good diplomat must be able to deal with people at the highest and lowest levels and be comfortable doing both," says Datuk Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak, secretary-general I of the Foreign Ministry and former director-general of the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR).

"He or she must also be a nationalist at heart and an internationalist in perspective because your job is to promote and defend Malaysia's interest."

Well said. For Malaysia is recognised as an important voice in the international arena and in its support of the developing world, and it is vital that the corp of diplomats she sends out is highly geared and motivated in upholding her image abroad.

Although much of the credit has been given to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for paving the way, it is the diplomats who have had to make his vision a reality.

So how well are our diplomats performing? Are they spot on with tackling pomp and protocol as they are grappling with sensitive life-threatening situations?

Recent issues were raised in the Dewan Rakyat concerning the effectiveness of our diplomats, one being the suitability of experts in other fields serving as corp members. It was said that the complex make-up of the world has made it necessary for diplomats to be well-versed in all fields.

The question of whether a diplomat should be a generalist or a specialist has been raised before, says Fuzi. While he agrees it is impossible for a diplomat to be an expert in everything, the inclusion of specialists from other fields needs careful thinking.

At what level do they come in? Where should they be sent? Do politicians and former civil servants, for example, expect to be ambassadors, willing to be posted to Papua New Guinea or Laos? Or would they only insist on New York, London or Brussels postings?

Would they also be willing to fulfil all the other responsibilities that come with being a diplomat or just perform duties in their area of expertise?

Another issue was that the missions are not doing enough to respond to the negative publicity Malaysia has received over the past year.

Not true, says a Foreign Ministry official. One of the main responsibilities of the missions is to disseminate information about Malaysia. Our missions have countered the negative press, and explained the real situation in the country.

The public must also recognise that other countries do not rely solely on diplomats to learn about a country, says Fuzi. "The world has access to the Internet and CNN. Foreign newspapers have their reporters here, and countries have their own embassies and businessmen based in Malaysia."

And because information technology and the Internet have changed the way the world receives information, diplomats must be able to provide more indepth and detailed information.

One good way a diplomat can hone his people-managing skills is to attend receptions. It is there he gets to talk about Malaysia and her policies. It is not a social affair, but a duty, says Fuzi.

It goes without saying that diplomats must meet people and make contacts to keep abreast of things. Only then can they analyse and provide the relevant solutions for any situation.

Recognising that the nature of the job has changed over the years, future diplomats are now required to undergo six months of training before joining the Ministry.

The training includes courses on dining and grooming, financial management and administration, media skills, international negotiations and strategic analysis.

There is even a course on handling hostage situations, which was introduced after ambassador Datuk Ahmad Mokhtar Selat's encounter with the Tupac Amaru in Peru.

On allegations that some diplomats do not attend functions because they don't drink alcohol, Fuzi says being a diplomat does not mean you have to drink or serve alcohol.

"Many embassies have 'dry' receptions but they are still well attended. You attend for the closeness of relations, not for the drinks," says the Special Envoy of the Prime Minister and former Foreign Ministry secretary-general, Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar.

"As long as you have the right attitude, your religious beliefs should not hamper your ability to do your job."

Perhaps the biggest complaint about our diplomats is that they do not speak English properly.

"Language is the only tool a diplomat has. If you cannot master the language, you cannot be effective. It is not good enough to be merely proficient, you must understand the nuances and intricacies of the language," says Kamil.

For example, at a drop of a hat he must know the right word to use - is it condemns, deploras, does not condone, or regrets ... an action?

In diplomatic parlance there is a world of difference and the diplomat must know which to use.

Recognising that there are diplomats whose command of the language is wanting, IDFR last year implemented a course, specially designed and focused on writing skills to aid in the drafting of documents, speeches and communiques. The course also helps prepare diplomats for public speaking.

Diplomats abroad who need to improve their English skills are required to take special classes as well.

There is, therefore, no short cut to being a good and effective diplomat. It requires expertise developed over the years. The late Tan Sri Zain Azraai, whom many consider to be one of Malaysia's best diplomats, once said that to be a diplomat you have to be a scholar, journalist, lawyer and politician.

All that, and a genuine knack and love for getting on with just about anyone.

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