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Strengthen national integrity systems

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INTERNATIONAL Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz was absolutely right to castigate members of the Malaysian International Chamber of Commerce and Industry who were "prepared to accept corruption if it was at a tolerable level" at the MICCI luncheon on June 15.

It is a sad commentary on the general attitude to corruption, prevalent among the business community in this and other countries, that they should countenance a situation that flies directly in the face of transparency and accountability - the twin pillars that support good governance.

The Minister likened corruption to dancing the tango. I have no quarrel with that assertion if it was limited to the fact that "it takes two to tango".

The similarity must end there because, unlike the tango, there is nothing elegant about corruption.

Her point is well taken; Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has himself made the same comment in the past, drawing attention to the need to address not just the demand side, but also, perhaps more importantly, the supply side of corruption.

Transparency International, the global coalition against corruption, took Dr Mahathir's constructive views to heart.

After some years of hard work, TI succeeded in persuading the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries to sign a convention to make it a crime to bribe foreign officials.

This is a great victory over what could only be charitably described as Western double standards - the practice in some European countries of granting tax relief to those of their companies that bribed their way to lucrative overseas contract.

Corruption was permissible provided it was perpetrated in someone else's backyard.

I sat enthralled at that memorable MICCI luncheon on June 15 listening to the Minister's spirited defence of the Government's position on corruption, and many of us present took great comfort from her unequivocal statement that the Government would not tolerate corruption in any shape or form.

The question of whether it was at an acceptable level or not simply did not arise. The message against corruption in national life could not have been clearer.

However, to be fair to Datuk J. Bonhott, president of the MICCI, when he raised corruption among the 12 business-related issues, he was merely articulating the legitimate concerns of the business community in a spirit of co-operation, in support of efforts to help advance Malaysia's attractiveness as a country in which to do business without recourse to bribery and corruption.

I thought he made it clear that he was referring to the continuing negative foreign perceptions about our country and the urgent need to reverse these damaging trends.

We may not always like the way we are perceived, particularly by the international business community, but we have to agree that while these perceptions may not have any basis in fact, they are nevertheless real.

Their effects on our economy, as we have seen, have been devastating.

It does our cause enormous harm to denigrate the value and importance to us of these perceptions because they often tell us more about ourselves

than we care to hear.

Economic globalisation with its uncompromising stand on "best practices" leaves us little choice in the way we manage our economic and financial affairs.

What this means in practice is that we must address quickly, where this has not been done, those issues perceived as impediments to the development of an open and transparent business environment.

And while we are about it, let us close as many windows of opportunity for corruption as possible and proceed to develop and strengthen our national integrity systems.