

19/08/1999

Time to improve lot of foreign service staff

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MUCH has been said in recent weeks about our Foreign Service and the role of our diplomats.

I wish to offer some thoughts on this issue - as the Foreign Service is vital to a nation's security and economic well-being.

Many years ago, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, at a ceremony to commemorate the deaths of our soldiers during the period of confrontation, remarked that when diplomacy fails, our soldiers die..."

Years of peace and prosperity have caused us to forget and perhaps neglect our Foreign Service. Now, when Malaysia is once again facing criticism and attack from abroad, our diplomats are accused of being unable to defend our national interests.

From my experience with our diplomats, they are exceedingly loyal - perhaps more than most.

Defending our nation and its interests is for them almost a knee-jerk reaction.

They are dedicated, motivated and hardworking. Malaysia's many foreign policy achievements would not have been possible without the hard work and sacrifice of our diplomats.

I think it is sad that our diplomats have received praise from many countries and institutions they served in but little recognition from their own nation.

Outsiders only see the cocktail parties and the so-called "high living" but in reality these only mask the enormous sacrifices, both personal and professional, that our diplomats have to make to serve the country.

Many are separated from their elderly parents at times when their parents need them most.

Some don't even make it back in time for their parents funeral! And in case there is a retort that the financial remuneration is reward enough - let me say that Malaysian diplomats are perhaps among the lowest paid in the world.

Those with children in secondary schools are now finding it a terrible financial strain to even pay the fees (even with a 2/3 subsidy from the Government).

They thus face the difficult choice of either leaving their children in Malaysia for three to four years or live like paupers abroad in order to keep their children with them at their post.

Those who serve abroad sometimes have to live in appalling conditions, often bereft even of medical care and all the other things which we in Malaysia now take for granted.

Reading from news reports over the years, I recall that our diplomats have been held hostage, robbed at gunpoint, have had to abandon their possessions and flee before invading armies or seek refuge from angry mobs.

And these are only the sensational stories. Many diplomats' families quietly suffer psychological and emotional stress as children are forced to make constant adjustments to strange and bewildering cultures.

It is no wonder that for years Wisma Putra has suffered from declining recruitment.

Please, the Malaysian Foreign Service is no bed of roses!

To be sure, the Foreign Service needs repairing. Language skills - the tools of the trade so to speak - are sorely lacking.

There are no specialists in the languages of our neighbours - Thailand, Vietnam, China, India - leave alone those further afield.

Funds for publicity, travel and entertainment have been meagre at best.

Refresher courses - especially in global economics, the environment and new technologies - are sporadic.

And most of our embassies have been operating with less than their full complement of staff for years.

Until recently, Wisma Putra could not even afford to send Malaysian newspapers to all our embassies abroad!

If we desire to have a dynamic Foreign Service, we must be prepared to pay for it.

Without adequate funding, the ability of our diplomats to do their jobs will continue to be severely restricted.

Our diplomats don't need sympathy, just the tools to get the job done.

Many references have been made about cocktail parties with the indication that our diplomats are wasting their time attending such functions.

To the uninitiated, cocktail receptions may seem like fun. However, for those who have to attend several receptions a week, it is a tiresome chore.

Many of our diplomats don't even drink alcohol so forget the wine and the like. They go because they want to represent our country, because they want to tell Malaysia's story to all who will listen, because they want to make new contacts.

Our diplomats did not invent cocktail parties but they have to learn to live in that environment because that is the way the work gets done, because that's where the movers and shakers often are.

Also there needs to be realistic expectations of our Foreign Service. The bad Press overseas is a case in point. Many foreign newspapers have their own bias and agendas.

Often, no amount of explanation or clarification can change their minds. In such cases our diplomats can only endeavour to mitigate the worst excesses of these publications.

Perhaps more importantly, they quietly and often successfully convince those who really matter - the investors, the businessmen, the tourists - that despite the bad Press, Malaysia is still a great place to invest in, do business with or visit.

With the limited resources they have, they cannot reach everyone but they can and do try to reach those who really matter. They do their part for Team Malaysia!

We have in our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad an outstanding world leader. His vision and determination has inspired many nations.

Malaysia's name is held in high esteem everywhere except by those who feel threatened and uneasy by independent and forceful nations that are determined to march to the beat of their own drums.

Let's think how we can give Dr Mahathir and Malaysia the kind of Foreign Service that they need and deserve as we march into the new millennium.