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Biased reports and TV stations going ga-ga

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MOST of the news we read these days is political and, therefore, judgemental. On occasions, though, a correction or clarification is made.

One such was published in the letters to the editor page of the Asian Wall Street Journal issue of September 1-3. It came from Yeong Yoon Ying, Press Secretary to Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew. With the heading Dr Mahathir Is Innocent, it runs thus:

"In reference to your report 'Singapore's Lee Says Anwar Case Was Mishandled' (Page One, August 18) on Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's press conference in Kuala Lumpur, allow me to clarify Mr Lee's position.

"Four months after Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's arrest, Mr Lee asked Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at Davos, 'Why did you arrest Anwar under the Internal Security Act? How could he be a national security threat when until four weeks ago he was your deputy?'

"Dr Mahathir said he did not know Mr Anwar was to be arrested under the ISA. It was the legal prerogative of then-Inspector General of Police Tan Sri Rahim Noor.

Mr Lee said "it should have been a straightforward criminal charge for corruption and sodomy or whatever. Mr Anwar should have been produced in court the day after the arrest." The next disaster was Mr Anwar's black eye. Dr Mahathir told Mr Lee that he had nothing to do with that as it was not in his interest.

"The police Inspector-General committed these blunders, Dr Mahathir carried the political fallout from Mr Rahim's acts and paid a heavy price. The impression the world had was that Dr Mahathir had personally ordered Mr Anwar's arrest under the ISA and the subsequent black eye he suffered while in police custody.

"And Mr Anwar with his black eye on world TV and newspapers coloured international perceptions of the Anwar trial. It also affected the subsequent general elections.

"Mr Lee could not understand Dr Mahathir's attitude, until he learned from Dr Mahathir's close friends that he tended to be very loyal toward officers who worked for him. With the Anwar trial over, Mr Lee wanted to put on record his belief that Dr Mahathir was not responsible for Mr Anwar's arrest under ISA, nor for Mr Anwar's black eye - two events which triggered what followed."

As had been noted, a good number of the questions from the foreign media during Lee's press conference was about Anwar despite the fact that the main purpose of his visit was to see the sea-change that had taken place in Malaysia since his visit some 10 years ago.

There was also his fruitful talks with Dr Mahathir, paving the way for better relations between Singapore and Malaysia.

But the story that went around the world was something else. It explains the recent statement by Forbes magazine chairman, Caspar Weingberger, about the lack of knowledge and understanding among Americans about South-East Asia.

"Sometimes this lack of understanding is shockingly displayed. Sometimes we have a speech like Al Gore's," he added in a newspaper interview.

It was a reference to the US Vice-President's remarks during the Apec Summit in Kuala Lumpur two years ago when he praised reformasi demonstrators during a dinner hosted by Dr Mahathir.

At the time the US Ambassador was John R. Malott, now retired and the

question is what advice he gave to Gore about the situation in Malaysia.

As it is he has penned an article on Anwar on a website relating to something which has never been mentioned in Malaysia. Fancy that!

Meanwhile, the US Ambassador to Indonesia, Robert S. Gelbard is much in the news following his reported interview with The Washington Times on August 29. It has made the cover of Gatra, the Jakarta newsweekly magazine.

He was reported to have said that foreign terrorists had infiltrated into Indonesia and that the country had reverted back to being anti-America. Mentioned was his reported remarks that the Indonesian military had lost its direction in provinces such as Aceh and Maluku.

Gelbard's reported remarks were regarded as undiplomatic and an interference in the country's internal affairs. Published were criticisms from various quarters. Also quoted was a denial by Akbar Tanjung, head of the Golkar Party that Indonesia had now become anti-America.

The Indonesia Foreign Ministry has since sought clarifications from Gelbard. There is Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab's own comment about The Washington Times news report: "We are not sure that the report was accurate."

Would there be a correction or clarification then from the US Embassy's Information Attache to the paper's letters to the editor page? A forum of such a nature is not, however, available on television and radio. Certain biased reports, therefore, remain uncorrected.

Reported recently was how a television station or network does other things. It has to do with the BBC's lead news story one day in August about its decision to put back one of its own broadcasts by an hour.

Following the announcement it sought political reactions and thereby validate the importance to the story as an observer tartly later.

Quote: "How often do journalists accuse other professions of being self-regarding? If one of the BBC's own initiative is a big news story, it makes you wonder what news is."

Ah, but some television networks go ga-ga when running down another country or its leader.

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