

10/03/2000

Frothy frosty Roth

IT IS quite assuring to see a US official actually making an effort to "clarify" a statement made on Malaysia by another government official, Assistant Secretary of State of East Asia and Pacific Affairs Stanley Roth, who reportedly said last week in Hong Kong that "until there is a change in the policies, it is difficult to envisage a warmer relationship between the United States and Malaysia". One could imagine that this official "who asked not to be named" occupies a fairly senior position in the Clinton Administration and had spoken to the Bernama representative in Washington out of a need to stress, particularly to the Malaysian public, that Roth's remarks did not wholly reflect Washington's stand on Malaysia.

Certainly, Roth's remarks do not reflect the state of bilateral ties. In terms of investment, the US has remained Malaysia's largest and most important source of foreign direct investment over the years. Last year, US investors proposed to establish projects valued at some RM2.54 billion (RM6.5 billion in 1998), more than doubled the worth of proposed Japanese investments in Malaysia. In terms of trade, the US has been Malaysia's largest export market for many years. America is still a favourite place for thousands of Malaysians to send their children for further studies every year. In terms of economic cooperation, American companies are actively involved in various socio-economic programmes and are represented on various national committees.

There have been numerous clashes of views between Malaysians and Americans but these almost never involved the ordinary person. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is an outspoken critic of the US but mainly with regards to policies that discriminate against developing countries and also mostly in response to American criticism of Malaysia, the Third World and Islamic countries, and of his own views on various issues. Malaysia is also against American unilateralism, veto power, double standards, extra-territorial tendencies, and holier-than-thou attitude.

But Malaysia also looks to the US for inspiration; for example, Dr Mahathir went to the Silicon Valley himself to look at what Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor must do to succeed and he woos American enterprises to invest in Malaysia because they have the technology, the motivation as well as the innovation. Malaysia never condemned Americans for constructing the tallest buildings in the world before the Petronas Twin Towers, for sending a few men to the moon with money that could have fed millions of hungry people, or for making the largest battle ships and deadliest bombs. On their part, US envoys to Asean take the initiative to go coast-to-coast every year to "sell" the potential of economies in the region to their businessmen back home. And leaders and officials from both nations engage in dialogues at various levels to enhance bilateral relations.

For Roth to speak of Malaysia as if it was a major foe of Uncle Sam, therefore, is uncalled for. While he said the US did not regard Dr Mahathir as a dictator or "another Pinochet", the references themselves are clearly aimed at making people draw parallels between the Prime Minister and the former Chilean president and other dictators. Roth spoke of the "heavy-handed" way Dr Mahathir handles Anwar, the opposition, the press, the judiciary and the general election and of Malaysia's "worsening" human rights situation and disrespect for the rule of law. In

short, what happened in Malaysia over the last 18 months is not a government that the Clinton Administration would want to associate with, Roth said.

If Washington does subscribe to Roth's views, it would only confirm where the US is headed. After all, he was just belatedly taking the cue from Vice President and presidential hopeful Al Gore, who showed Malaysians in November 1998 how shockingly impertinent and irresponsible the stand-in American head of government could be. At least the official who asked not to be named has put things in the correct perspective by noting that "there is chill in the air but the water is not frozen". Let's hope nobody catches a cold.

(END)