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Tension eases as players adjust to new rules

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SHANGRI-LA PEDULI - this was the heading of a small note found in every room in the Shangri-La hotel in Jakarta. In English, the heading says "Change for a Change".

This letter, addressed to all guests during their stay in the hotel, reads:

"Dear Guests,

"Indeed, these are challenging times in Indonesia. Projections are that at least half the population will fall below the poverty line at some point this year. Official inflation figures for the last fiscal year have been publicised at 80 per cent, though a key indicator is the price of a kilogramme of rice that has increased 182 per cent from its pre-crisis price.

"Upon departing Indonesia, you may have some spare currency that you no longer need. We would appreciate any contribution sealed in this envelope and deposited in the designated box at our reception desk. We will allocate all funds to elementary schoolchildren whose families could no longer afford the annual tuition of Rp100,000. The identified students will then continue their education for the next year.

"We thank you for your care and generosity."

The note is written on the back of an envelope carrying the logo of a heart. A casual inspection of the box shows quite a pile of envelopes already deposited. Malaysian businessmen made casual remarks of this and some appeared ready to make their donations there and then.

The hotel is doing its bit in trying to ease the hardship of the people in a nation which is trying to come to terms with their new environment. A change in Government and a new President are among the major changes they are facing, which brings with it a certain measure of uncertainty during the transition period.

But one thing seems certain - President Abdurrahman Wahid seems to have managed to ease the tension in many parts of Jakarta. Compared to many months last year, Jakarta is more calm and is regaining its notoriety for a crowded, bustling, ever moving city. In fact, the traffic jams are back. In April last year, I reported that Jakarta was aman-aman minyak, bila-bila masa boleh terbakar lagi. This was the view of a taxi driver. Last week, while covering Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit, I was taken to several areas in the city and at one point came across a group of protesters, though it was not a violent demonstration. The situation today is much more peaceful than a few months ago, but some kind of apprehension seems to hang in the air. Businessmen who came here to assess the situation were still trying to get to know the people who are now in power, and were particularly trying to get to know the rules following changes introduced by the new regime.

One businessman said he was not going to rush into investing in Indonesia, but he is attracted to the market of the vast millions of people. He wants to find out the people's purchasing power before embarking on any deal. Yet another businessman appeared to be more optimistic, which stems from a deal he was working on involving a third party that he is already familiar with. This time around, there also seems to be a lot more business activity. The shopping complexes were busy and offering discounts of up to 70 per cent for certain imported items. Blok M, a well-known shopping area, was full of Malaysians buying batik and

other local items.

Natrabu, a famous nasi padang restaurant where a picture of Dr Mahathir hangs on the wall as if to tell everyone that the food is endorsed at such a high level, is full with locals and foreigners. But Sari Bundo, another famous nasi padang restaurant, said to be a favourite of former Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, is closed for renovation. But the restaurant has several branches and one can still have Sari Bundo rendang and dendeng elsewhere. One can also order the food and have it sent to wherever one desires. Jakarta has nasi padang restaurants everywhere.

Things seem to be slowly changing in Jakarta, away from the unsettled months which saw rioting and looting for the better part of last year. At the airport, foreigners were greeted by polite immigration officials, surpassed only by customs officers who seemed to have left the practice of asking for cigarettes and gifts behind.

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