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The ugly Malaysian rears his head again

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THE ugly Malaysian is rearing his head again as the economy bounces back from the recent crisis. Many seem to have forgotten that the country was, just two years ago, plunged into the worst recession in its independent history with much of the wealth which took decades to create destroyed almost overnight.

The improved economic conditions and feel-good factor coupled with the improved performance of the stock market, corporations, banking and financial sector, the manufacturing and export sector, have brought the smile back to the faces of Malaysian businessmen and entrepreneurs.

Many are walking tall again as the V-shaped recovery begins to show in the bottom lines with much of the red ink erased. This in itself is welcome. But the recovery has also brought out the ugly side of Malaysians, with many taking things for granted and becoming arrogant in their dealings. They have forgotten what they had to go through during the bad times and it is "back to the good old days" or should it be "the bad old days"? Haven't we learnt anything from the crisis?

Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin was visibly upset when several businessmen accompanying Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Jakarta recently did not attend the individual meetings with their Indonesian counterparts. His annoyance is understandable and even justified as the Indonesians want to learn from Malaysia how to get out of their crisis.

The businessmen were told to be serious and not just show up to be seen with the Prime Minister. "It is serious business," they were reminded as "it involves the image and good name of the country and the businessmen themselves".

This, however, is not the first time businessmen accompanying the Prime Minister and ministers have been ticked off for not attending meetings and taking these overseas "assignments" seriously. It is increasingly evident that Malaysians have very short memories.

All Malaysians - be they businessmen, entrepreneurs, politicians or journalists - have a responsibility to ensure that the "good name of the country" is not tarnished by their irresponsible behaviour and attitude abroad.

Malaysians are fortunate that they did not have to suffer as much as many of their neighbours. Home grown and unorthodox remedies saved the country and its citizens from social dislocation and disruption. Unemployment and layoffs were limited, inflation checked and Malaysia continues to attract foreign labour to fill vacancies.

The country was also spared the humiliation suffered by its neighbours of having to call in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to help. The once "proud" Indonesia was humiliated as the nation and the world watched President Suharto sign the IMF agreement under the watchful eye of then IMF managing director Michel Camdessus.

It was a scene of a "defeated army general" signing away his territory to the victor. This is how one Indonesian described the now famous picture.

It was extremely degrading to see the president do that, an Indonesian friend said, adding that his country did not have the muscle nor the courage to stand up to pressure from abroad. This was especially so with the crisis that hit fast and deep. This point was also made by President

Abdurrahman Wahid when he addressed UNCTAD X in Bangkok recently.

Indonesians are still suffering and trying to pick up the pieces to get on with their lives and to rebuild their nation. Indonesia is turning to Malaysia for help and is keen to learn more about the New Economic Policy and its wealth distribution characteristics.

Malaysian businessmen should not ignore these calls for help and help they certainly can.

Indonesia's economic prosperity and political stability is critical to the stability of the region. Malaysia's "prosper thy neighbour" policy is even more relevant today than it was before the crisis.

All the more, Malaysians should be aware of the role they can play in ensuring economic development in Indonesia, a country which shares a long border with Malaysia. The economic prosperity of Indonesia will also have an impact on Malaysia and its businesses.

When they once considered themselves "big brother" to Malaysia, the Indonesians now consider themselves lucky to have Malaysia as a friend and neighbour on whom they can depend and look to for assistance.

Circumstances have changed and so has the situation. But it does not give Malaysians, or anyone else, the right to ignore the importance of cooperation and assistance.

It does not matter that the businessmen pay their own way when accompanying the Prime Minister and other ministers. What is important and relevant is that they represent their country well through their behaviour, actions, deeds and words.

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