

26/07/2001

Being mindful of national aspirations

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WE write in reference to Mohd Salim Mohd Tahir's letter entitled "MTC insensitive to country's background" (NST, July 24).

Salim made a truthful and fair statement when he said that "big and small Chinese furniture manufacturers too have had their fair share of closures as well as the Bumiputeras".

We are in total agreement that few Bumiputera furniture companies have lasted as long as his had and we congratulate him for his success, which we are sure was built upon his diligence and perseverance.

It is true that it was on his return from the up-market IMM Cologne (International Furniture Fair Cologne) in January 1999 that the Primary Industries Minister had said that instead of the classy and sophisticated display expected of us, the display at the Malaysian booth resembled "selling rojak in a pasar malam".

From that year, MTC was entrusted by the Minister to move the industry forward and to bring the best of Malaysian furniture to this international fair.

While we empathise with Salim's sentiments on being rejected, we feel we have to answer to specific points which he brought up in his letter.

As to the delay in the refund of his deposit, we wish to clarify that the deadline for submission of applications by companies expressing intent to participate was March 5, 1999.

Confirmation of the space for Malaysia from Kolnmesse, the organiser of IMM Cologne, came only on Sept 16, 1999.

Selection was immediately held after this date.

Successful applicants were informed immediately of the decision and the deposits returned to companies which were unsuccessful.

For the purpose of selection, a technical working committee meeting was convened on Sept 21, 1999, to select the potential participants for Cologne.

All companies, which had applied for space, were scrutinised carefully to ensure that they met all the criteria for participation.

The criteria for selection included suitability of products, product design, quality, acceptability in the specific market and ability of a company to display the products in a professional manner at exhibitions, especially for companies which have taken part before in MTC co-ordinated exhibitions.

Preference is given to furniture manufacturers rather than trading companies.

Another criteria is that they must be a member of the recognised national timber associations.

We must emphasise that the technical working committee places a premium on high quality design so that only the very top range of Malaysian furniture makes it to this prestigious fair.

Safety standards are good but the additionality of high-grade design sophistication tailored to the discerning demands and tastes of buyers with up-market lifestyles is a pre-requisite for furniture fairs such as the IMM Cologne.

The Government's push is for us to showcase the best quality and design of Malaysian furniture products.

On the question as to whether MTC has the expertise to judge the suitability of products, we wish to point out that selection for

participation at all international furniture fairs is done through a technical working committee.

The committee consists of the MTC, Malaysian Timber Industry Board and the Malaysian Furniture Industry Council.

In the case of IMM Cologne, the Malaysian-German Chamber of Commerce is also represented. In fact, the organisers of the show had even made a trip here to evaluate our commitment.

For building and construction material fairs, the relevant timber associations will be invited to sit in the technical working committee.

The relevant experts are brought in to ensure that we showcase the right products which are of the best quality to fulfil the exacting standards of the international markets.

We wish to assure Salim that MTC practises fair play in the selection of exhibitors.

Its programme is open to all Peninsular Malaysia-based companies.

Each year, its annual programme is published in all major newspapers. This information is also found on its website and periodicals. In addition, all national timber associations are informed well in advance of upcoming activities so that they can in turn inform their members.

Perhaps it is fair to point out that in most of its programmes carried out so far this year, including the San Francisco Winter Mart, Mission to China and the upcoming Index 2001, Bumiputera participation is apparent in every occasion as follows:

- * San Francisco Winter Mart - one of three companies;
- * Mission to China - two of 17 companies; and,
- * Index 2001 - four of 31 companies.

Malaysia is now a leading producer of furniture in the Asean region.

We want a reputation of being a world-class producer and exporter, not only in terms of quantity but more importantly in terms of quality.

Through Salim's letter, we are reading the positive elements that Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras alike - the Malaysian furniture manufacturers - want to make it internationally.

For this they also need to transform themselves to Original Design Manufacturers/Original Brand Manufacturers.

We want to build up the image of our furniture industry so it is on par with the established furniture manufacturers.

Such a scenario is not likely to take place unless we set our own perspectives and vision. Strictly speaking, we still have some way to go in developing the quality equivalent to that of Italian furniture and the marketing skills of the Americans.

There are countries in the region which are fast catching up with us.

A few of them have a distinct advantage over us in terms cheap labour.

We cannot afford to underestimate our competitors.

That is why we value the vision and perception of our leaders like Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who exhort us to protect and promote national interests.

We are not where we want to be yet but we know what must be done. We must battle with what is out there.

We must take stock and evaluate our capabilities and shortcomings.

MTC is very much aware of the need to shed the unfair image of Malaysian furniture being cheap and mass-produced in backyard operations.

In this sense, we are very much aware of the country's high aspirations and sensitive to the country's background.