

15/10/2001

Cool heads needed in time of strife

K.P. Waran

"TO evacuate or not to evacuate is the question"... this may not sound very Shakespearean but this seems to be a dilemma senior Wisma Putra officials face every time there is trouble in a foreign land.

It is easy to understand that. The lives of Malaysians are precious and immediate action is always necessary in the event of civil strife.

As one diplomat put it mildly: "If a Malaysian youth falls from a tree and breaks his arm in a foreign country, nobody bats an eyelid. But if he breaks his arm during a riot in another country, the citizens of your country will be up in arms."

So the need to take precautionary measures to ensure the safety of its citizens is a paramount responsibility of the Malaysian Government and the onerous task of deciding on action falls squarely on the shoulders of Wisma Putra.

In nearly all these cases, the reports and views of the Malaysian representatives in the country in question are taken into consideration before such action.

In the case of Pakistan where there are about 450 Malaysians registered with the High Commission, the situation has been tense over the past month, especially after President Pervez Musharraf's decision to support the US-led military strikes against Afghanistan.

Musharraf's Government moved quickly to quell the protests by upgrading security, arresting leaders clamouring for riots and appealing to the people not to resort to street demonstrations.

He expressed confidence that the silent majority far outweighs the banner-carrying minority screaming abuse at the Government and singing the praises of Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, and this has proven true.

Musharraf also expressed disappointment at the number of foreigners leaving the country and appealed to the international community not to abandon his nation.

Urging foreigners in the country to have faith in his Government, he asked that no action be taken in haste which may undermine the already weak economy.

So I was quite shocked to be woken up by my News Editor Calvin Goh by a 5am telephone call in Islamabad and ordered to get reactions to statements by certain Wisma Putra officials that Malaysians may be evacuated from Pakistan and that C130 aircraft were being readied for this purpose.

Having spent the previous day roaming with a bunch of friends all over Islamabad and Rawalpindi, including shopping for salwar kameez material, leather jackets, and eating a sumptuous Afghan dinner at Raja Bazaar where literally thousands of people were milling about, I had no clue why it was necessary to evacuate anyone.

Except for reports of the deaths of four people in Quetta (1,500km from Islamabad) and some trouble in Peshawar, the rest of the country was peaceful.

With most Malaysians concentrated in Islamabad and Karachi (where protest rallies were common even before the present scenario), the reason for the Foreign Ministry officials to press the panic button cannot be fathomed, especially since Malaysians have been briefed not to take part in the rallies.

One Pakistani Foreign Ministry official when introduced to Malaysian journalists remarked: Wo Malaysia wapis quoon nahi gayaa. Jehaz kya nahin

aya, which meant "How was it that I have not left for Malaysia" and "Could it be that the planes did not arrive". The words Malaysia and khali karna (evacuate) punctuated Urdu newspaper reports.

Malaysian High Commissioner Datuk Sofian Ahmad, whose duty was to monitor the situation in Pakistan, clearly indicated from the outset that the situation was "not life threatening" and the "Government was in full control of the situation".

Precautionary measures including enabling Malaysians to obtain visas to India and drawing up a contingency plan in the event the situation deteriorates showed foresight on the part of Malaysian High Commission.

Malaysia is viewed by Pakistan as a fellow Muslim nation and close friend. With countless other countries relying on initiatives from Kuala Lumpur as a cue to what to do next, it is imperative that Wisma Putra takes extra care before dropping any bombshell.

Wisma Putra should also learn from its past experience, including the massive evacuation exercise that it launched in Cambodia several years ago after Prime Minister Hun Sen's troops clashed with Prince Ranaridh's forces.

Apart from costing the Government millions of ringgit, it merely served as an opportunity for the evacuees to return home for a holiday. Most of them returned to Phnom Penh within days, after it was realised that the situation did not escalate to anarchy as predicted.

Malaysia, under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's direction, has made great strides in international diplomacy and is looked up to for its pragmatism, level-headedness and for taking on causes that affect the developing world.

These achievements should not be jeopardised by knee-jerk reactions from Wisma Putra, without sufficiently studying the situation on the ground. It may lead Malaysians and the rest of the world to conclude that Foreign Ministry officials are weak in the knees.

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