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## Enhance diplomats' role

MALAYSIAN missions abroad, by virtue of their role and responsibilities, must be attuned to the country's aspirations especially in an era of global interdependence and increasing competitiveness. Through the years, there have been vast changes in foreign policy priorities, from defending the country's sovereignty after independence to development and improving the people's living standards. Traditional diplomacy emphasises politics, security and consular affairs.

But the role of heads of missions is not just to hold receptions or the occasional tete-a-tete or meeting with Malaysians in the host country. They must be well informed about the laws and regulations of the countries they serve in. They must be well versed in global trading operations and regulations in view of our increasing dependence on foreign trade for growth. In promoting trade, they also render help to and arrange appointments at times for Malaysians who have commercial ventures abroad.

True, we do have trade representatives overseas but our diplomatic corps, by virtue of its multifarious duties and excellent networking, has the persuasive authority that few other public servants have. More so when they are in constant touch with Kuala Lumpur and imbibe first-hand information on policies and current events. Malaysia's high profile international role, its emergence as a major trading nation and the increasing number of Malaysians doing business abroad necessitates a re-evaluation of the role of the diplomatic and foreign service.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has often called on heads of Malaysian missions abroad to examine, from time to time, changes in the country's policy priorities to maximise their effectiveness. It is not just the written policies they must understand but the implied ones as well. Indeed, new approaches are needed to tackle the country's challenges dynamically and to protect the nation's image and integrity. Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar has said this is included in recommendations to the Cabinet soon to enhance the role and functions of our missions overseas.

Malaysia has excellent bilateral ties with many countries but this should not be taken for granted, especially those with strong interests in our country. As this elite corps of officers is generally held in high esteem and holds credible and current views, they must ensure the Malaysian community abroad, especially students, are provided regular updates on happenings here. At times, this impressionable lot is not just misinformed, but may be disinformed, on the political and economic scenario at home. Notwithstanding the lack of resources and manpower, our foreign missions must walk the extra mile to communicate effectively. The esprit de corps must always be upheld.

Though experience is an arch to build upon, it alone is insufficient to enable even seasoned officers to face relentless pressure in challenging times. As such, it may help to have refresher courses which cover current global issues from the art of negotiation, human rights and the environment to commercial law, media, public relations and effective communication.

If there is a language handicap, especially among new recruits, they may not be able to carry out their duties effectively. Ultimately, our diplomats must uphold Malaysia's interest at all times and project the right image professionally.

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