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Eyes off the facts

DOUBTLESS, the journalistic integrity of the Associated Press has been severely compromised by its erroneous report on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir. Worse, it smacks of motivated journalism - the demonisation of Dr Mahathir and Malaysia as we have already seen in editorials, opinions and columns by literary parasites who allow themselves the luxury of know-all patronising indignation, distortion, unsubstantiated allegations and innuendoes.

But the AP article in question is a news report, a genre that does not permit the reporter the privilege of spouting off opinions, much less his prejudices. A news report should be accurate both in fact and context. A reporter is not a stenographer but a fact-gatherer, a truth squad. Plainly, such an elementary standard was not met in the AP's article for its reporter had intentionally or otherwise lifted Dr Mahathir's statement out of context.

As an established news organisation with global reach, the AP reports carry the stamp of legitimacy. While no media can control how people react, the least it can do is ensure that people react to the truth, not lies. On the basis of AP's lazy, sloppy and wrong reporting, Dr Mahathir and Malaysia are besmirched as anti-Semitic and thus, exposed to international opprobrium.

Press accountability means the publisher, editor and reporter should be eager to receive complaints, investigate them diligently and correct all mistakes in fact, context and fairness swiftly, prominently and unambiguously. Even if the mistake was genuine, the AP must hold itself accountable and not turn a blind eye to its misdeed. It is not only the Prime Minister's office but the people of Malaysia too that demand the AP to issue a correction and public apology to Dr Mahathir.

This distasteful episode evokes memories of AP's 1999 Pulitzer-prize winning Korea massacre despatch, in which it did not inform readers thereafter that the information it printed was false. Should no apology be forthcoming from the AP, then we suspect that since the No Gun Ri piece, its decline has already set in unmistakably and inexorably.

There is an elementary lesson taught to cub reporters that perhaps the AP should heed the next time it files a sizzling piece on Dr Mahathir: "If your mother says she loves you, check it out".

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