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Fiction and bias drive foreign media's demonisation of Dr Mahathir

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THE Associated Press blatantly compromised two of the cardinal principles of journalism - accuracy and good faith - when it transmitted across the globe the erroneous report on the Prime Minister's statement in Parliament on Monday, and waited three days before making a correction.

It missed out on accuracy because the report, written by one Sean Yoong, quoted Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for what he didn't say.

The AP went on to ignore good faith when it chose not to report the clarification Dr Mahathir's office made a day after the erroneous report was published by various newspapers throughout the world.

The AP admitted making a mistake only after the Prime Minister's office sent an official complaint to the AP, addressed to its Kuala Lumpur news editor Rohan Sullivan, on Wednesday. It, however, made no apology to Dr Mahathir.

An apology to the Prime Minister is in fact warranted because Yoong's report was not only taken out of context, but was totally wrong.

While the Prime Minister had said that the terrorists should have attacked Israel if they were unhappy over the Palestinian issue and not the World Trade Center where many nationalities were working, Yoong's report quoted Dr Mahathir as asking the United States and Britain to attack the Israelis.

Even a young budding reporter would have been able to tell the difference. It looks quite obvious that Yoong did not have his pulse on the whole issue or did not bother to do his homework.

Anyone who has been following the issue would be able to tell that the Government is consistent in its stand against terrorism, on the US-led attacks against Afghanistan and the Palestinian issue.

A good question would be whether Yoong was present at the Dewan Rakyat when Dr Mahathir made the statement. Having covered Parliamentary proceedings for a decade or so, this writer can tell that it is not the usual practice for reporters representing foreign wire agencies to attend Parliamentary sessions.

However, the issue here is not where Yoong sourced the story, but the damage that he had done with a single erroneous report.

The report was picked up by the Asian Wall Street Journal, The Independent and the Belfast Telegraph, to name a few. To the readers of these newspapers, the Prime Minister is anti-semitic.

They will certainly think so because neither the AP nor the other foreign wire services in Malaysia reported the clarification issued by the Prime Minister's Office on Tuesday.

The foreign wire services are fond of carrying erroneous reports and making no effort to correct them - even if they do, which is a rarity, it often comes too late.

It was so in 1997, when Dr Mahathir was quoted as saying that efforts to impede the economy of Malaysia and other Muslim countries were due to the conspiracy of the Jews. The Prime Minister made no such remarks, but that was what was reported.

As the mistake was never corrected, the Prime Minister remained, in the eyes of some, anti-semitic.

As a result several US congressmen took the matter to Congress and the US almost denounced Malaysia as a racist state. Fortunately, the Congress knew better of Malaysia and the resolution brought by a few congressmen

was thrown out without debate. Many saw it as an attempt by the foreign Press to pit the Prime Minister against the Jews.

The fact is, the Malaysian Government is not anti-semitic. One needs no reminder that it was Dr Mahathir's Cabinet which decided to allow the Israeli team to take part in the International Cricket Council Trophy in Kuala Lumpur in April 1997.

At the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation meeting in Bandar Seri Begawan last year, the Agence France Presse reported that International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and United States Trade Representative Charlene Barchefsky "exchanged words that can be considered not polite".

Both Rafidah and Barchefsky later expressed shock because the meeting was held in a cordial atmosphere. As it turned out, the so-called heated exchange of words was merely a figment of the reporter's fertile imagination.

Frustrated by the fact that both Barchefsky and Rafidah had categorically denied the report, the AFP filed another story a day later, calling poor Rafidah "Madam Rapid Fire", and describing her as a "portly 57-year-old".

Of course, the earlier story which claimed that Rafidah and Barchefsky had a row, was, as usual, never corrected.

But it will be good to wait and see whether the AP will issue a public apology to the Prime Minister for the error in its report.

The correction which the AP had sent out yesterday is obviously too late because the damage has already been done. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that all the newspapers who had carried the erroneous report would now publish the clarification that the AP issued yesterday.

This is especially because the clarification only came three days after the error was made. Surely the AP, being a news agency, is aware that old news is no news.

Nevertheless, if the AP wants to uphold its professionalism, integrity and credibility, it has to issue a public apology to the Prime Minister. Otherwise, its motives and intentions will from now on be questioned.

The content of anything that sells itself as journalism should be free of any motive other than informing its customers or readers. It should not be influenced by anything else. But we have seen in the past the pattern of mischievous reporting on Dr Mahathir and Malaysia.

Reason, common sense and facts have nothing to do with their deliberate demonisation of Dr Mahathir.

There is only one real reason: the Western media is enslaved to their political masters and in their masters' scheme of things, Dr Mahathir is an anathema because he is not the glob of gullibility that they wish him to be.

In other words, he does not dance to their tune.

The way they ignore explanations and demands for corrections shows that the foreign Press have delusions of monopoly over factual correctness.

It is emblematic of sheer arrogance and lack of accountability.

One has to demystify the reading process when it comes to the reports filed by AP and other agencies.

A strenuous chore, nevertheless here are the guidelines on how to read reports filed by them: First, determine fact from fiction; catch the bias, straighten the slant and coax out every facet of the story.

Press freedom is defended by the ability to maintain its credibility. Clearly, these agencies failed themselves.

If the same was done just across the causeway down south, they would have been made to pay for their mischief, and pay dearly at that.