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Importance to investment, trade

Baidura Ahmad; Farrah Naz Karim

PART love, part hate, part envy, part fear. This is how one American reporter covering the Afghanistan war described the relationship America has with the rest of the world following the attacks in New York and Washington.

Since Sept 11, more than ever, that relationship has been under scrutiny. The question most asked is "Why the hatred?"

"The explanation is very, very, complex. If you ask different people you are going to get different views. Probably envy is part of it, but it is not the ultimate explanation," said US Ambassador to Malaysia Marie Huhtala.

"Americans have a hard time understanding why anyone would hate us because we like ourselves. Basically, America is an open country and thousands of immigrants come in every year. People from all over the world like living in America. And we accept them, we have no problem with that. Most of us are the children of immigrants, the descendants of immigrants."

Huhtala herself is a descendant of immigrants - Dutch, French, Irish and English, while husband Eino A. Huhtala Jr is of Finnish and English descent.

"Terrible incidents, such as the killing of Americans overseas or the bombing of American interests, disturb us very much. But Americans travel overseas frequently, they live overseas. Generally, myself included, Americans find that people like America. They want to get to know us. They like our culture, they watch our movies and television programmes."

Huhtala, who reported for work on Oct 1, agrees that the Bush administration enjoys a better relationship with Kuala Lumpur.

"We have had some gestures on the part of the Malaysian Government. We hope to see a better relationship this year and we have responded to these gestures.

"(For example), the meeting between the two leaders (US President George Bush and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) at the Apec summit in Shanghai last month was excellent. They had excellent discussions and got to know each other a little bit and it was very, very positive on both sides."

Huhtala, the second US woman ambassador in Malaysia, first visited Malaysia in 1972 as a tourist with her husband.

"Oh, yes, it's good to be back. One thing that's really nice is that I have a lot of experience in Southeast Asia. Even though I have never lived in Malaysia before, still it is the same kind of people. I think it is the Southeast Asian mentality that I like," said Huhtala, looking elegant in a dress suit made of ethnic print fabric which she bought while in Thailand.

A native of California, Huhtala joined the Foreign Service in 1972. She has served in Paris, Chiang Mai, Taipei and Hong Kong. From 1992 to 1995, she was Consul General and Principal Officer at the US Consulate in Quebec City.

Prior to her nomination to be US Ambassador to Malaysia, she served as the Minister Counsellor and Deputy Chief of Mission in Bangkok.

Huhtala, who has always wanted to be a diplomat, considers it a bonus that her chosen career has brought her to where she is today.

She received an undergraduate degree in French at Santa Clara University in California and a masters in political science at Laval University, Quebec. She also spent a year doing strategic studies at the National War

College at Fort McNair.

She also loves learning new languages and is fluent in French, Thai and Chinese. Soon she will be able to add Bahasa Malaysia to that list as she is now taking lessons almost every morning at 7.30am.

She showed off a smattering of Bahasa Malaysia, "Saya beli barang," when asked whether she could speak the language well enough to do marketing at the local wet market.

Bahasa Malaysia lessons, meeting the Prime Minister, granting media interviews and holding late night video-conferencing with US corporate movers and shakers are just the many duties of the new American ambassador.

Huhtala appreciates the fact that her husband, who is in the private sector, is here with her at the moment.

"Maybe it is a little harder for a man, but my husband has always had a career of his own. Right now he is doing some of his work from here using the Internet. Fortunately now you can do that."

"Ours is a commuter spouse relationship. I need him to be here for me. Our two grown children (daughter Karen, a molecular biologist, and son Jorma, an air force officer) are in the US because of work commitments."