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Japan-Media

JAPAN'S "PR BODY" TURNS 25 AMIDST TROUBLING ECONOMY

By: Jackson Sawatan

TOKYO, Oct 3 (Bernama) -- Japan's Foreign Press Centre (FPC), an independent body set up in October 1976, is perhaps the most important centre when it comes to the issues of improving the way Japan is reported in the international media.

Located next to the administrative area in central Tokyo, the centre celebrates its 25th anniversary tomorrow with a meet-the-foreign press reception party, albeit in a modest way.

Throughout its existence, it has helped many foreign journalists understand Japan and therefore equipped themselves with better insight whenever they report about the country.

Nowadays however, the task shouldered by the FPC seems all the more challenging, no thanks to Japan's overall gloomy economy.

The country now has an unemployment rate of 5 per cent, which is still low compared to other developed nations, but unprecedented in this country which values the concept of lifetime employment.

With that and a host of other economic-related problems, punctuated by a 0.8 per cent growth in the second quarter of 2001, it is indeed a challenge, to say the least, for Japan to explain what has become of itself -- a task the FPC must help shoulder.

"This is an interesting time for Japan," FPC president Yoshio Hatano told Bernama and New Straits Times journalists who are in this city to participate in a seven-week FPC-sponsored journalist fellowship programme.

The FPC has been making every effort to have the realities of Japan conveyed to the world through its various support activities for foreign journalists in the country.

It helps journalists make arrangements for their coverage, helps set up interviews with key Japanese people from the various sectors, and also organises tours to places of interest like manufacturing plants, research laboratories and other facilities.

The centre also organises journalist fellowship programmes such as the one participated by two Malaysian journalists, including this reporter.

Hatano said that he came up with the idea to set up the centre while serving abroad in various capacities.

While overseas, he came to the realisation that despite the large amount of money, time and personnel doing public relations for Japan abroad, "what appear in the front page of The Washington Post, written by their correspondence in Japan, was not as what we have issued."

"So I thought that instead of doing PR abroad or in addition to doing PR abroad, we should do PR in Japan to journalists operating in the country so that at least they do not write misleading stories," he said.

Hatano, 69, a former diplomat who has served as an ambassador to the United Nations, said what they intend to do was to help foreign journalists to enable them to write correct stories.

"I know they would not write what we expect...the best that we can do is to let journalists write correct stories," he said.

Elaborating further, he said: "As long as they depict Japan as it is, that is the best that we can expect. We have learned in the past that while we wanted them to write good stories so that the readers loves Japan, that is not always the case," he said.

There are 700 foreign journalists based in Japan at any one time, while some 1,500 others visit the country on a short-term basis every year to

report on Japan.

Throughout its 25 years of history, the FPC has conducted invitational programmes involving 1,007 journalists, 64 of whom were from Malaysia.

The rest came from other Asian countries, Europe, Africa, West Asia, Latin America, Caribbean countries as well as Eastern Europe and Russia.

To keep its independence as a private non-profit organisation, FPC's basic fund is provided jointly by the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association and the Keidandren or the Japan Federation of Economic Organisation as well as from government appropriations for contracted work. Other sources are contributions of supporting organisations and individuals.

"In maintaining and in the operation of our centre, we should try to detach from the government...we do not necessarily follow the government line of explaining things, we should be neutral," Hatano said.

"In this declining economy, however, its difficult to raise private funds. This is my headache...so although I said we should be detached from the government, we need the government's fund to at least finance the journalist invitation programme," he said.

Asked whether he was satisfied with the centre's achievement, or for that matter, the journalists' way of reporting about Japan, he said: "I am not 100 per cent satisfied but I have come to believe that this is the best I can achieve.

"I don't think that my government is 100 per cent satisfied either but I am rather satisfied with the journalists."

Conversations on Japan nowadays would eventually lead to the country's economic woes and how Japan would want to be seen by the world in this "overwhelmingly gloomy scenario" as one observer puts it.

Hatano said Japan could not be too ambitious in projecting itself to the world.

"We can't give different image from what we are. Our economy is suffering and we are also in a difficult position diplomatically," Hatano said.

For example, he said, when the United States was in good terms with China, Japan would have it easy diplomatically.

There were also the need to project Japan as a cultural country and not merely to be seen as an economic country as what had been the case all this while, he said.

FPC managing director Masahiko Ishizuka meanwhile said he felt that there was still a need to improve the way the foreign media report about Japan, especially in terms of accuracy and sufficiency.

"But it is up to them...we could never be able to force them to write according to the way we like. We simply give assistance. We give hints on how we like Japan to be reported, of course, but it is up to them to take the hint," Ishizuka said.

On how Malaysia is seen from the Japanese point of view, he said they basically identify Malaysia with the strong leadership of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"Your Prime Minister is very well-known among the business people here. He comes to Japan at least once a year...he is a very important speaker. His books are also popular and translated into Japanese.

"I think he (Dr Mahathir) is irritated with Japan losing its confidence and called upon Japan to not merely follow what the United States say," he said.

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