

# For love of the country

STAR - 5 OCT 2002

By THEAN LEE CHENG

---

**T**AN Sri Razali Ismail opened the door of his penthouse himself. Leading the way to some chairs, he brought up the fax given a few weeks earlier.

"I don't like words, 'VIP and their indulgence' that you used. I'm not a VIP. Respect should be given but servility based on stratification, ..." he trails off.

"Sit anywhere you like," came the brusque invitation as he lowered himself into some leather, with the Petronas Twin Towers silhouetted behind him.

Razali needs no introduction. He carved out a name for himself in public service and is now using the skills he picked up there in the private corporate world.

"I'm just a small frog in a big pond. But given the situation we are in now, the big frog is not doing so well ..."

Razali does not like to be known for his past contributions, but to be recognised for what he is doing now.

"I started off a non-executive

banker. I left within a year. I got involved with the environmental industries. That was more successful. I am into information technology now and have a certain percentage of Iris. So that is quite successful."

This little piece is not about contributions or accolades. It's about what he does in his private time in order to make that public contribution, be it as United Nations permanent representative, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's adviser, Iris Corp Bhd chairman or Allianz General Insurance Malaysia Bhd chairman.

"I have supporting bases which I build for myself. Places where I put myself back in equilibrium. In New York, there was a boat that I took out every now and then, and which I kept in Long Island South. Or I golf.

"I am not a city person. I was born in 1939 in Alor Setar and I grew up in a half-town, half-village. You go out of the barbed wire of the house and you are on to the paddy fields."

Though Razali is spending a good part of his working life in various cities around the world, his roots are in the countryside. Every now and then, he retreats to his huts. He has two.

He says: "People buy houses in Perth. I have huts here and there. One is in the wetlands. I go there by road and by boat. There are pythons, cobras and iguanas there. I co-exist with them. Sometimes they take away my chickens which live on the trees. I have ducks flying around. It's an incredible sight. The people living there know they are my ducks. I used to go there twice a month, now once every six weeks.

"I have another retreat in Ulu Slim, Perak where I have a 70-acre farm. I am a gentleman farmer. Geese and the

ducks are part of the area. I also have goats in an area that I lease from the Perak state. I go there to smell the place."

He pauses, his mind going to a place where he gets his heavenly manna and returns in less than a minute to his penthouse.

"Malaysians are so remote from all this. All you know is virtual reality. Your idea of a rhinoceros is the tip of the horn in front of you. You have never been close to one, as I have. Never gone on a boat and been within 20 yards of the big fellow.

"You look at this bell. Smell it."

Razali passes over an antique

looking bell hanging from some straggly black hair.

"I was picnicking with the yak owner. This is yak hair," he says, his spirit going back to that bright sunny day.

"The memories that I have are like a balm." Not far away is a photo of the fisherman in him, taken some years back off the coast of Mombasa, Kenya. Razali leaves the geese and the yak to sail and fish in the oceans.

"You have to go out to the ocean for the big fish - the Caribbean, Atlantic or Indian Ocean, or near Pulau Aur, to catch the marlin.

Some of the fish are 300lbs to 400lbs each. Fishing gives me the sense of the pervasiveness of space. It is a wonderful feeling. Some people are lost in it but I revel in it. I forget completely whether Iris shares are up or down. My problems are not important. People go to war for space and there, all the space I need is before me.

"I fish because I am part of the environment and the fish, and the environment part of you. It is an encompassing experience, an affliction to some if one were to consider the money and the number of rods I have upstairs.

"Come, let us visit that room." Razali leads the way to the second storey of his three-storey penthouse along Jalan Tun Razak, Kuala Lumpur.

His rods, golf bags and exercise equipment are there. In the same room, is a long study table, what he calls his work area.

That room and all it holds are the heart and soul of this man. Remove it, and you destroy the man. ■