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A little help for terrorists

Rod Liddle

EARLY the other morning, a crab-eating macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*) broke into my hotel bedroom while I slept and stole my last four sachets of Coffee-Mate.

It is a good job I didn't catch him at it; they can be vicious little things when cornered, with their long, filthy, yellow teeth and fearsome temper, fuelled, presumably, by an unrelenting diet of crabs.

It was the closest I have been to danger of any kind since arriving in Malaysia in late November, and it could all have been averted had I done as the British Government advises travellers to this part of the world and been "vigilant" - i.e., in this particular case, locked the screen door before I went to bed.

If you are suffused with cowardice, as I am, there is something uplifting about being on the island of Langkawi. Hornbills screech and hoot from the primary rainforest, white-bellied sea eagles glide lazily overhead.

And you can take in this magnificence, enjoying as you do so a glass of chilled Sancerre, in the knowledge that the British Government and the Australian, German, Canadian and, most of all, the American Government - thinks you are quite reckless to be here at all.

You are a brave renegade, utterly insouciant about the "very increased" risk to life and limb.

This is a pleasant feeling, undoubtedly. But you may have to endure one or two rueful inquiries from the locals. "Where is everybody?" they ask, gazing around the expensive blond-wood lobbies of the big - chain hotels - the Sheraton, the Datai Bay, the Andaman - and alerting you to the fact that, as peak tourist season approaches, there's no one here. Or, at least, very few people indeed.

"We never see Americans any more. And not many British," a waiter at the Sheraton told me in the pretty seafront restaurant where I was, for almost the entire evening, the only diner.

The taxis stand idle at the airport; the market-traders have reduced their prices and pursue you with pleas and entreaties. The brand-new, air-conditioned cable-car across the mountains sways by, empty in the warm breeze.

The Malaysian Prime Minister, the canny Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, dropped by to check out the cable-car for himself earlier in December. And well he might: the project is part of a massive investment programme designed to establish Langkawi as the premier holiday resort in Southeast Asia.

"Where is everybody?" he was asked, as he posed for photographs at the rather swish (indeed, almost Swiss) terminus. He blamed the British Government - and the Americans and the Australians - for their stupid travel advice.

This strange and confusing advice, doled out by several Western governments via official announcements and websites, has been front-page news here pretty much every day for two weeks. It has infuriated the Malaysian (and Thai and Philippines) Governments and bemused and hurt the local people.

It has also threatened Malaysia's tourism - the country's second most important industry and increasingly vital to its future. And now the Tourism Minister has suggested that the number of people visiting the

country has dropped by a staggering 300,000 in the two months after the Bali bombings.

So Malaysians are seething with anger, the righteous anger of the just.

British High Commissioner Bruce Cleghorn, recognising the bilateral damage which might result from all this, has assured the Press here that relations between the two countries were entirely normal and that British people had not been told to stay away.

What he might have added is that the British Government's announcement warning people about travelling to Malaysia was made to protect the Foreign Office, not the traveller.

The FO's guidelines are of no use whatsoever to the traveller.

Worse than this, it is a supremely duplicitous process: on the one hand the British Government makes a big deal of telling people about the dangers of travelling in Malaysia, littering its website with comments about greatly increased risk and the need to be vigilant (of what, exactly? Macaques?) - all of which would serve to deter the cautious holidaymaker - and then a few days later blithely insists that there's no trouble at all.

See what you make of this conversation that I had with the British High Commission in Kuala Lumpur.

Question: Is it OK to travel to Malaysia?

"Yes, of course, it's fine, although you should be vigilant and avoid certain places."

Ah. What places?

"Well, anywhere in Malaysia, really. It's difficult to explain."

Anywhere?

"Yes. All public places"

What, like hotels, airports, bars, nightclubs, beaches ...?

"Yes, that's right."

So, pretty much everywhere, then. Are you worried about a possible terrorist attack in Malaysia?

"No, not at all."

Is there any evidence of the likelihood of a terrorist attack in Malaysia?

"No."

Has there been a terrorist attack of any kind in Malaysia in recent years?

"No."

Has any British national ever been killed in a terrorist attack in Malaysia?

"No."

Thank you for your help and guidance: Selamat petang.

In fact, in the last year for which figures are available, just one British national died while on holiday in Malaysia. The number of British people who, in the same year, perished of "unnatural" causes in the US was 89.

I don't know how they met their ends - car accidents, food poisoning or maybe they were picked off, one by one, by banjo-playing, whooping, redneck sodomites, as in the film Deliverance. Whatever, the message is pretty clear: if it's risk you're after, visit the good ol' gun-slingin' USA.

But should we give a monkey's that the Malaysians are annoyed with us? Should we care that in order for the Foreign Office to cover its back ("We warned you about Malaysia!") we help to cripple their economy?

Malaysia is, without much doubt, one of a declining number of countries in the world where the British are not actively loathed by the indigenous population, and it is also a fairly important trading partner; but these

are not the clinching arguments. Malaysia has a multifaith and multiracial coalition government, the Barisan Nasional.

But in truth it is an overwhelmingly Muslim country; indeed, it is an "Islamic state", to quote Mahathir last year. And Islamic states which are democracies and support - with understandable caveats - the "War Against Terrorism" are thin on the ground.

Recently, the US announced, with all of the arrogance and condescension that, sadly, we have come to expect from the current administration, that it was "pleased" with Malaysia's "collaboration" with the US in the fight to defeat terror. They are famously immune to irony, our US cousins.

Malaysia has for years - well before Sept 11, rate been keeping fairly tough control of its own troublesome fundamentalists, in particular Al Maunah and the KMM. Trouble is, before 9/11 it received only censure from the West for "abusing the human rights" of its own citizens.

There will be a general election in Malaysia next year. After 20 years, Dr Mahathir is stepping down. It may be a difficult time. Watch this space.

* This article first appeared in The Spectator, where Rod Liddle is an associate editor.