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Stop chasing the media away like stray dogs

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IT'S quite common for me and my colleagues in the media to be chased away like dogs. It's not an unfamiliar experience for me and my colleagues in the media to be shouted at and to have doors slammed in our faces. Neither is it strange for journalists and photographers to be shooed away as if we were parasites waiting for an ounce of meat from the dinner tables of the rich and powerful.

I've seen it all. Fellow editors often complain of their journalists and photographers being badly treated when on assignments, be it official or otherwise. All too often media personnel are treated like dirt and made to suffer embarrassment, and are ridiculed. I've seen it all.

The latest incident was at the scene of the landslide which destroyed the house of Jen (rtd) Tan Sri Ismail Omar on Wednesday. Ismail lost his wife, Puan Sri Azizah Abdul Aziz, son Ahmad Ijaz, daughter-in-law Zaradini Zaini, grand-daughter Zurian Aishah Ahmad, grandson Johan Ahmad and son-in-law Ahmad Shamsul Azhar Shafie when a pre-dawn landslide brought down his house at Taman Hillview in Ulu Klang.

I was at the scene to see the destruction for myself. I received the first indication of what had happened through a short text message on my cellular phone around 6.45am, and this was followed by a phone call on the fixed line at home. Soon afterwards, I had the information verified and came to know whose house it was that had been destroyed.

I had no problem getting through the police line to the scene. I then met Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak who had excused himself from attending the weekly Cabinet meeting. His presence gave an air of authority and sufficient high profile to the search and rescue operations going on then.

Naturally, there was a horde of newsmen and photographers at the scene. Of course, there was a bigger contingent of policemen and armed forces personnel going about their job, directly assisting the Search and Rescue operations or on standby duty. Everyone was looking for information, and I mean everyone.

Members of SMART were doing what they've been trained for. There were Military Police personnel doing crowd control, besides the blue-uniformed policemen on beat duty who were also doing the same. Volunteers made up the rest of the crowd, while friends, relatives and colleagues of the unfortunate family were also present, anxiously waiting to know the fate of Ismail and his family.

The Press corps made for only a small number of those in the crowd. They have a job to do, just like all the others who were there. In the absence of a media liaison person at the scene of the incident, the Press were left to their own devices in trying to get information and photographs.

It was when they were doing their job that the photographers, particularly, were chased away. They were barked at, shouted at, told off and shooed off like dogs. Some were even warned of bodily eviction from the scene by an over-zealous uniformed personnel who gave himself full authority over one and all.

But you can't pin a good photographer or newsmen down. The pictures displayed on the page one of all newspapers the following day showed how resourceful the photographers were, despite being chased away and shouted at.

As for the journalists, they were fortunate that Najib was present. The

minister, to his credit, listened to advice and spoke to the Press at a hastily-called Press conference by the roadside. Maybe it was his training or the fact that he's a seasoned politician, but Najib acknowledged the important role of the Press and gave it due attention.

I've seen all too often the Press being sidelined. On some occasions, the Press is included or invited to functions as an after-thought. This is all wrong. Sidelining or chasing away the media is counter-productive, and reflects a certain amount of insecurity. Chasing away the Press or slamming the doors in their face is not the way to maintain a relationship with the media.

All those guilty of this should emulate the country's number one salesman, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who never fails to engage the media in whatever situation. I remember taking part in a meeting with him and a few other senior Cabinet ministers when the financial crisis hit the country in 1997.

Instead of shutting out the media, Dr Mahathir engaged us in a dialogue. He explained what the crisis was all about and how it affected everyone. He made no effort to stop us from doing our work. Instead, he shared his perspective of the crisis with us, and what we could do to help the country in confidence-building, staying united and work towards a speedy recovery.

The nation, rightly then, was facing a crisis. And yet Dr Mahathir saw it fit to still speak to us.

It was unlike the scene at the Taman Hillview landslide where many media personnel, especially photographers, were shouted at and told to go away like stray dogs. Somehow, I think we are beginning to lose our ability to handle a tight situation. A situation like what we saw last week requires careful handling.

Very often, the lack of an accurate flow of information could result in a vacuum which may be filled by speculation of potentially damaging proportions. My advice is to engage the Press rather than to shut us out. It's better to bring the media in from the beginning rather than to seek