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Crafting a Third World voice

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WHEN I left school, I had three options: join the civil service; go into commerce, which my father wanted; or take up journalism, which I preferred.

Looking back, I have no regrets. I became, age 19-plus, a reporter of this paper. I first reported an era of progress, then became a part of that remarkable change, and now I've come full circle. I'm back where I began. For me, it has been an unforgettable life.

Newspapers are crucial. They provide wide coverage and articles and comments in depth - making some events first-and-lasting impressions of the Malaysian historical panorama. Life and newspapering should be lived with passion and boldness, seeking fun and enjoying the journey. I think it's my job to help create excitement wherever I go and whatever I do.

Excitement, passion and courage are important in a terribly unequal world. No matter how ingenious our theories on humanity, it's impossible to see how it could have been otherwise.

Human societies have developed unequally since the Iron Age, and much of history has been about the inevitable points of contact between advanced and backward peoples in an ever shrinking globe. Just as inevitably, these points of contact have been about the strong overwhelming the weak.

Imperialism has been the subject of heated discourse and invective only recently, and, rather peculiarly, only in relation to the period of European colonialisation from the mid-19th century to the end of the Second World War.

But it has been practised for much, much longer. Invasion, conquest and subjugation have been employed by every civilisation, from the Babylonians and Egyptians to the Greeks and Romans to the Christians and, of course, the Muslims.

It is more than fair to assume (actually, I think it is axiomatic) that imperialism, in one form or another, will be with us for a long time to come. The heroes and villians might take different guises (or disguises).

Most of its objectives might no longer be achieved through sword and armour or the barrel of a gun - although the US-Israel policy in Palestine and the Bush Administration's intentions on Saddam Hussein are brazenly militaristic.

But imperialism will always be present at the points of contact, wherever the strong interfaces with the weak, the rich nations with the poor. The points of contact are getting wider and deeper. They are not restricted to the physical, they include the psychological and intellectual as well.

There is, however, a big difference between the present and the past. Developing nations have learnt the painful lessons of history. If they wanted to, they would now be better able to do something about the odds stacked against them.

Against the might of the West, poor and developing countries only have the weight of numbers. Unfortunately, their ranks are disparate and quarrelsome, riven by divergent orientations and aims.

That was what Malaysia tried to put across at the Langkawi International Dialogue last week, and at all other international conferences that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has attended for the last 21 years.

Although notions of imperialism might sound hoary in the age of the Internet and globalisation, the urge of the strong to attain hegemony over

the weak is still palpable. And developing nations must unite against it.

The motives of domination are no longer as outwardly racist as those of Cecil Rhodes, but they come quite close to the Darwinian idea that might is right. The current epitome of this is the US.

The capture of "spheres of influence" is not confined to superpowers. Look closely, and the impetus of big corporations and multinationals to acquire "new markets" is not so very different from the profiteering of the East India Company.

Dr Mahathir's speech on economic terrorism was a warning of the dangers of division among developing countries in a free-market free-for-all for rich-country partronage, aid, trade and investment.

Imperialism might have the power of a force of nature, but as long as developing countries stick together, they can prevent the scales from tipping over. This is the most difficult task, and the neo-colonialists know it.

The delegates at Langkawi were all too aware of the consequences of their countries' often helpless dependence on the West. They knew the problems but could not decide on the solutions. This failure to agree comes partly from vastly varying experiences under colonialism.

The African countries suffered the worst and bear burning grudges to this day. This is understandable, but they can't go on with a burdensome chip on their shoulder. They must fight back.

In comparison, we in Malaysia mostly suffered indignity, although that was bad enough. Even so, it wasn't a humiliation so devastating that we failed to rise, and win and defend our independence.

One of the reasons Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra decided to fight for independence was that he was slighted as a student at Cambridge. He was told that his college, St Catharine's, was meant for the English, not the blacks. The college only relented after the Colonial Office in London argued that the Tunku was the son of the Sultan of Kedah whose consent was required for British rule there.

The Tunku maintained that he would have made the first-eleven in football had he been whiteskinned. But he laughed it all off and did not allow his hurt pride to become an impediment. He knew, like I do, how to distinguish the good from the bad among the British.

Even as I grew up in the last legs of British imperialism in Malaya, I was never overawed by the white man. At the age of 10, to get from Kota Baru to boarding school at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, I had to go through southern Thailand. I was inoculated by a British nurse - my first encounter with a Mat Salleh. Then I was interviewed by the Chief Education Officer of Kelantan, I think his name was Pearce, who wore a monocle.

When I arrived at MCKK I was met by its headmaster H.R. Carey, whom I then had to see every week to receive pocket money, and taught by British teachers. I liked them, particularly after I quickly found out that they were as human as I was.

Perhaps that is why the African participants at Langkawi, many of them heads of government, admire this country. I was quite touched by their earnest questions, their eagerness to learn. In spite of many years of independence, their countries haven't completely regained their dignity.

Dignity has to be spoken up for, loudly and clearly, so its reclamation lies in the possession of a "voice" - not just a platform of polemic and diatribe but a credible articulation of national aspiration and achievement. Developing countries have huge axes to grind against the Western media, whose monopolistic and slanted reportage keeps them in a state of perpetual inferiority and shame.

We saw it in the reporting of the Sept 11 attacks and the subsequent US-

led war on terror in Afghanistan. And we continue to see it in the disaster-skewed coverage of all developing countries from Burundi to Bangladesh.

On Friday, at a forum chaired by Dr Mahathir, Dialogue delegates pointed justifiably accusing fingers at the Press in the countries of the South. I must say that the charges laid against the media practitioners - including the New Straits Times - were not easy to answer. Our reliance on the news agencies for foreign news, for example, is an embarassment we're so used to that it doesn't bother us anymore.

Our defence has always been that of cost and convenience. The international wire services offer a breadth and speed of coverage that the non-Western world simply can't match. And they write in English - an incalculable advantage worldwide over every other language.

Because we have to carry news, and would be derelict in our duty if we didn't, we have often been left with no choice. Such a practical preference is not confined to the Press. Even government ministers, here as elsewhere, prefer to speak to the Western media because of its reach and extensive coverage.

I know that from experience. President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee are among the few exceptions. Even then, Islamabad and New Delhi probably let me interview them because of the large presence of Malaysians of Pakistani and Indian origin.

Most people dislike the uninformed prejudices of the CNN or BBC but would jump to be interviewed by them, but not Brunei Television. I personally abhor our dependence on the foreign news services. But until there is a feasible alternative we will continue to use them.

Although we did send correspondents to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the wake of Sept 11, their dispatches were a drop in the ocean compared with the resources and expertise of the agencies. They were put into the shade by the Western Press, who are better connected and enjoy easier access. In field reporting, the white man gets better treatment even if he services much smaller readerships.

We could have tailored the wire reports according to our own perspectives. But that would have been difficult to accomplish under the pressure of breaking news. We must gain the skills to rewrite agency stories. Unfortunately, we still lack the competence.

Whatever the circumstances, the fault is ours, and it is one we have tried to address for decades without much success. But let me plead some mitigation on the question of the lack of South-South co-operation in the media. National or government-owned news sources are rarely trusted, mainly because they can't tell the difference between truth (at least how the independent Press sees it) and propaganda. This applies to those in the developed countries too (with the possible exception of AFP, the French agency).

Over the years, developing countries have tried to erect their own barriers against the Western global media monolith. Mostly, however, they made a hash of it, sounding more like Pravda at the height of the Sovietera or Sukarno's Antara than Reuters, AP or UPI at their infrequent best. (We now lean towards the AFP, which we find less biased than the others.)

The national news agency Bernama was formed to punch a hole in the over-lordship of the Western agencies. It has mostly done a fair job covering the country and beyond. But it still needs to do more, though it may be constrained by manpower and funding. There is a market for targeted, objective and alternative (to the Western media) news. Al-Jazeera has shown the way.

There is plenty still to do to right the imbalance between the developed

and the developing world. The local media plays a central role in building up national self-confidence. A newspaper worth its salt must have many good stories to tell. We are striving to do just that.