

04/08/2002

A shame should political undercurrent jeopardise Langkawi

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THE swaying palm trees and calm sea made for a very conducive atmosphere for an intellectual discourse befitting the Langkawi International Dialogue. Langkawi's biggest talk show with a sense of purpose was held at the Pelangi Beach Resort, the very retreat of the Commonwealth Heads of Government when they gathered in Kuala Lumpur for their summit in 1989.

LID participants were quite encouraged to share their experiences and thoughts amid such a relaxed setting.

In the tents where the main deliberations were held heads of State and Government quite readily traded views, some of which would be discussed further for possible implementation. Smaller groups met separately in various function rooms, only to regroup to present their deliberations to the plenary session.

Hence, the people most busy were the conference organisers and backroom boys and girls who worked very hard at arranging and re-arranging the logistics.

The LID is one of several international events held in Langkawi, the legendary island whose fame as an idyllic holiday get-away is fast spreading.

The Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition (Lima), which was first held in 1991 and has been repeated every two years, is perhaps the most well-known of the events, helping put Langkawi on the world aviation map.

The Le Tour de Langkawi cycling tournament is fast gaining international recognition, besides the annual go-kart championship. Langkawi is not short of international exposure and has its fair share of backpackers throughout the year soaking up the sun along the white, sandy beach of the Andaman Sea.

The staging of these events has helped propel Langkawi into international prominence, and much infrastructure has been put into place to support them. With this infrastructure came jobs, and an awakening to the local people, many of whom can be seen reaping the benefits.

I met a few local people in between attending the LID sessions. They were restaurant owners who had enjoyed brisk business the past few days. They look forward to these big events as they boost their coffers.

But I sensed anxiety when talking to them.

In fact, one sounded rather worried when I asked what the future would be when Langkawi's single most active promoter, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, calls it a day in October next year.

The Prime Minister is credited with developing Langkawi into what it is today. Dr Mahathir's personal attention has kept everyone on their toes and eager to succeed.

In fact, Dr Mahathir made a short tour of ongoing projects on the island soon after touching down to attend the LID. While the LID was the main item in his diary, the site visits were no less important.

Such attention and scrutiny has awakened Langkawi from its long slumber and led it to be one of Malaysia's success stories.

Roads have been widened; the airport expanded to cater to bigger planes and more arrivals; a new hospital has been in operation for several years already; new commercial centres offer all sorts of bargains and commercial opportunities; more money changers have opened shops and outlets; hotels to cater for all budgets have sprung up; hawker centres are many and

scattered all over the island; and new cars are adding to the small congestion during the peak season.

The people of Langkawi, according to outsiders, have got it made. Within a short span of some 10 years their income levels have shot up and living standards improved. Overnight, the Government, and almost singularly Dr Mahathir, has turned Langkawi's natural beauty, charm and Mahsuri's curse into a winning combination of fame and fortune.

Yet somehow, I get the feeling that underneath all the physical success, a political undercurrent seems to be developing. The island's political leaders must get to the ground as soon as possible and engage the electorate intelligently, frequently and regularly.

Failure to do so would allow others to work their way in with their low-profile ceramah and coffeeshop dialogues. Away from the bright lights, forces are at work making certain sections of the business community edgy over Langkawi's future political alignment.