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Khalil-Mission (News Focus) (with pix)

MISSION TO SHARE AND EXCHANGE INFO FROM NILE VALLEY TO KLANG VALLEY

By Mokhtar Hussain

KUALA LUMPUR, April 25 (Bernama) -- An important mission now awaits Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob as Malaysia's Information Minister. A mission that not only requires him to traverse across desert nations but to also cross boundaries of conflict zones in the Arab region.

The objective is to form cooperation for sharing and exchanging of information and news from the Nile Valley to Klang Valley.

For this purpose, Khalil plays the role of the information officer, explaining and clarifying ideas and programmes deemed feasible for implementation in nations of the South.

The ideas are meant for the creation of the South-South News Gateway (SSIG).

These ideas were highlighted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the Langkawi International Dialogue in 1999.

According to the Prime Minister South nations should fraternise with one another through regular information exchanges on activities in their respective countries, and not look at each other through the eyes of the Western media which frequently projected the "ugly side" of a particular country.

Following this a news network portal named "Smart News Network International" or SNNi was launched in Kampala, Uganda at end of 2001.

The launching was jointly officiated by Dr Mahathir together with Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and President of Mozambique, Joaquim Chissano.

SNNi merges media from South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Malaysian media includes BERNAMA, The New Straits Times, The Star and Utusan Malaysia. The African media are Namibia Today, New Vision (Uganda), Bua News (Afrika Selatan) and The Herald (Zimbabwe).

Henceforth the efforts should be expanded to include other media such as radio and television programmes.

For this purpose in early April Khalil led a delegation from Angkasapuri to Egypt and Lebanon in the first phase of realising the objectives.

The delegation included BERNAMA Editor-in-Chief Jaafar Hussin and Deputy Director-General of Broadcasting Haji Abdul Rahman Abdul Wahid.

Khalil said if peoples of the South could share information directly, it would minimise dependence on the Western Media as a source of news which were constantly biased and inaccurate.

This was even more apparent following the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on Sept 11 last year, where a majority of the news issued subsequent to the event focused on Muslims and Muslim nations, inclusive of Malaysia.

The western media was used to the fullest to promote the actions of the United States and its ally Britain.

The voice and thoughts of the Muslim community were downplayed. Fortunately there was Al-Jazeera station in Qatar that could provide a reasonably better picture of the situation, at least since the commentary came from a Muslim nation.

An officer in the delegation had observed this paradox.

While in Beirut, he had witnessed how the people of the Arab nations had staged protests and demonstrations almost on a daily basis since the

Israeli incursions into Palestinian territory.

However, he said, the CNN coverage and the feed submitted had not given the true and accurate picture of the events.

Upon arrival of Khalil's delegation to Cairo, the group could observe how Egypt's capital had been transformed into a hub for the gathering of news and content for television for the Arab region.

The strategic location and communication facilities available in the city famous for the history of human civilisation have enabled the media fraternity to congregate in Cairo.

It is believed there are at least 600 representatives of the foreign media converging in Cairo at any one time especially for coverage of the West Asian crisis.

Initially the Malaysian delegation felt that it was a tall order and a heavy responsibility to explain the objectives of the mission.

However the pleasant reception they received in Cairo was a source of relief for members of Khalil's delegation.

The hosts quickly arranged for signing of Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) between Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) and Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) as well as between BERNAMA and MENA, the Middle East News Agency.

Egyptian Information Minister Mohammed Safwat El-Sherif, commenting after witnessing the signing ceremony, had described the effort as " a very good agreement."

Khalil who said Malaysians were familiar with Egyptian programmes and dramas called for more Egyptian dramas to be dubbed into Bahasa Malaysia or into English while Malay dramas could be dubbed into Arabic.

The language factor, he said, was important, and Malaysian students in Arab countries could provide assistance in this respect.

While meeting up with several Malaysian students in Cairo the minister told them students fluent in Arabic could help in strengthening the ties between Malaysia and Arab nations.

Cairo's firm acceptance of Malaysia's efforts was evident when Minister Mohammed Safwat, whose daughter was receiving treatment for injuries sustained in a road accident, took the trouble to rush from the hospital to meet his Malaysian counterpart.

In Beirut, Khalil's delegation was given a cordial welcome by Information Minister Ghazi Al-Aridi who assured that he would request his officers to formulate a similar programme to achieve the common objectives.

Malaysia is no stranger to the people of West Asia. A Lebanese who met up with the delegation, when told of the group's objectives responded, " Hey, that's a very good idea. Please ensure that it will happen immediately.

During an interview, Khalil voiced the need for a BERNAMA representative in Cairo, reaffirming that the Malaysian audience needed to get the true picture of the situation in West Asia and vice-versa.

For example, in Cairo he observed a misconception amongst the people especially the media in West Asia who claimed Malaysia had shifted its stand towards the Palestinian struggle following the definition of terrorism during the Special Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers held in Kuala Lumpur recently.

The question was posed to Khalil during an interview with Nile TV's popular newscaster Dina Othman when he visited the TV station.

Khalil said the confusion could be avoided if there were parties monitoring the situation and making efforts to clarify the issue.

During his visits to Egypt and Lebanon Khalil visited the office of the oldest Arabic newspaper the Al-Ahram in Cairo and the television station Tele-Liban in Beirut.

He said the visit had highlighted the need to adopt digital format for television in Malaysia to ensure quality in broadcasting.

The minister also visited the Mubarak Centre that offers production facilities with a variety of media equipment and is dubbed "The Hollywood of the Middle East".

Khalil who was impressed with the facilities and technology there said RTM should not delay any further in adopting the digital format for the satisfaction of its audience.

The minister's mission could be considered successful, and Khalil could even manage a smile when he finally found the album of Arabic songs that had eluded him for some time.

He would probably render these songs once he was back in Malaysia. Hopefully the "Melayu Asli" albums presented to his hosts as souvenirs would find their way into air waves of Egypt and Lebanon.

Khalil and his group are scheduled to visit Morocco, Sudan and Syria next.

-- BERNAMA  
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