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New Canadian visa requirements lead to much heartburn

Balan Moses

MALAYSIANS were generally in a flap last week over the Canadian decision to remove the waiver on visas, with some charging that the country was aping the United States in "profiling" Muslims and people from Islamic nations.

The issue received more than its share of attention for the fact that Malaysia has hitherto enjoyed an uneventful relationship with Canada.

There seemed no good reason for the development and this irked the Berita Harian which editorialised on the issue later in the week.

The newspaper said the decision had not taken into consideration the fact that Malaysia was Canada's largest trading partner in South-East Asia or that bilateral relations had so far been healthy between the two Commonwealth nations.

Suggesting that Canada had perhaps buckled to pressure from its immediate neighbour on visa waivers, Berita Harian said the move strongly hinted of profiling biased against Muslims and Islamic nations.

This, it declared, was despite the clarification from Canadian High Commissioner to Malaysia, Jean McCloskey, that the move was a security measure which had nothing to do with race or religion.

Finding this untenable, the newspaper said the need for visas was clearly an act of discrimination against Muslims and Islam which had been tied to terrorism.

Referring to Canadian Immigration Minister Denis Coderre who suggested that Malaysian passports and their issuance were suspect, the Berita Harian said any such remark should be based on proof.

The newspaper said Malaysian passports were no less to others around the world, comparable to those issued by advanced nations.

According to it, it was right for Wisma Putra to send a protest note to Canada seeking the withdrawal of the move.

"Nevertheless, we can expect this is not going to change anything," it said alluding to the fact that the visa requirement may be a fait accompli.

Berita Harian suggested that the Government institute a similar requirement for Canadians who can still visit without a visa.

The newspaper, indicating the extent of its discontent with Canada, suggested that Malaysians not visit the nation unless it was utterly necessary.

The Chinese newspapers also went to town on the issue, castigating Canada for its move and the US for blacklisting Malaysia.

The China Press said the Government should disprove Canada's insinuations that Malaysian passports were suspect and open to abuse.

The Nanyang Siang Pau said the Government should vehemently protest the Canadian and US move, which it deemed discriminatory, to protect the sovereignty and economic stability of the nation.

The newspaper also quoted Deputy Home Minister Datuk Zainal Abidin Zin as saying that the Government would not retaliate but would act rationally in the matter.

Another issue that raised eyebrows last week was Pas spiritual leader Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat's acknowledgement that he had erred in saying Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad could not recite the Quran.

What he had meant to say was that Dr Mahathir could not speak Arabic, the Kelantan Menteri Besar said in a clarification of his earlier

statement which had come under immediate fire from Barisan Nasional loyalists.

Berita Harian and Utusan Malaysia yesterday reported that the leader had made the mistake of "defaming" the Prime Minister in a slip of the tongue caused by drowsiness after a nap.

Berita Harian reported that Nik Aziz was prepared to make a public apology to Dr Mahathir.

In its editorial, the newspaper said the apology was something to be looked forward to, with the tongue-in-cheek qualifier that Nik Aziz should not sleep or have a hearty meal before doing so.

In a footnote, the newspaper suggested that cassettes containing Nik Aziz's remarks about the Prime Minister be withdrawn from the market and replaced with cassettes containing the clarification.

Utusan Malaysia touched on another issue of contemporary importance last week, with columnist Awang Sulung asking if Malaysians were willing to drink Newater.

"For Muslims, there is surely another issue that needs to be taken into consideration. For the time being, there have not been problems (for Muslims) as the use of Newater is still limited. But it will become a problem in the long run."

The columnist in Bisik Bisik said he was thinking of the possible eventuality of Malaysian ministers being served Newater in Singapore.

"It will not be nice to reject the water. It will be difficult to drink it too. Perhaps they should take their own water," he suggested in a lighter vein.

The columnist ended by hoping that a diplomatic wrangle would not arise in such an instance over the issue of water being served to guests.