

25 APR 2002  
MSD-Surrender  
SURRENDER OF MSD BUILDINGS

By: Wan Ahmad Hulaimi

LONDON, April 25 (Bernama) -- The landlords arrived finally on 22nd April to close forever the buildings that once housed the Malaysian Students Department (MSD) and the popular Malaysia Hall canteen which had been operating in its basements for more than forty years.

The buildings passed from the control of the Malaysian government without ceremony as the closure of the canteen fifteen days earlier too went quietly with only a short notice from the canteen management announcing its sudden closure in a few days' time.

The surrender of the buildings - numbers 44 and 46 Bryanston Square - brought to an end Malaysian control which started in 1944-45 when the leasehold was acquired from the landlords Portman Estates for the then colonies of Malaya and Singapore for a premium of 7,000 pounds and an annual rent of 400 pounds.

Leases for the two adjacent buildings at numbers 46 and 47, acquired in 1956, and which now house the MSD and Malaysia Hall still have about ten more years to run.

It now remains unclear what the authorities intend to do with the remainder of the lease as signals that emanate from the offices of MSD are confused and unclear.

It is now understood that even their promise of re-opening a small cafe in its basement area to replace the closed canteen has been withdrawn.

The clearest indication of the future of Malaysia Hall - as the whole cluster of buildings have become known - came last year when the Deputy Minister of Education Datuk Aziz Shamsuddin said that they were now looking for new premises for Malaysia Hall, probably in the Bayswater area further west from the present site.

This idea was dismissed by Datuk Yunus Raiss, a long-time resident here and one of the most active campaigners for keeping Malaysia Hall in Bryanston Square, as uneconomic.

Datuk Yunus has now written to the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to ask him to look again at the future of Malaysia Hall.

When contacted today Datuk Yunus declined to reveal the contents of his letter to the Prime Minister but merely said that by letting the MSD buildings slip from our hands we had let pass a great opportunity when we could have done more to keep it in our hands at minimal cost.

He said we must now fight to keep the remaining buildings as an active centre for Malaysian students and other Malaysians here.

From its inception until the late 1980s Malaysia Hall functioned as a thriving centre of activities for Malaysians living or studying here.

In the years that led to its decline as a students centre, first the lounge then the library was closed to student visitors.

But even when the rest of the buildings became almost a no-go area for visitors, the canteen served as a useful social centre and a meeting place for Malaysian students and visitors.

The West End Football Club, an active soccer team of talented young Malaysian students used to meet regularly in the canteen to eat and plan their weekly strategy, but now with its closure they are "homeless".

Datuk Yunus, who runs a very successful English language school here, also used to give free lessons on practical English to young Malaysians at the canteen.

With all that gone, a group of Malaysians are now planning to raise

funds to set up a centre of their own to promote Malaysian language and culture here.

A member of the group who declined to give his name for the time being said: "We are saddened by the closure of the canteen and the reduction of Malaysia Hall which has existed in Bryanston Square for more than four decades."

"Our youngsters now have nowhere to go to study, to eat or to socialise. It looks like we can no longer rely on the Malaysian authorities to provide us a home so we are now going out in our own direction to look for a place that can serve as a centre for Malaysia and Malaysians."

Pioneering members of the group met at a Malaysian hotel here last Sunday to bounce ideas and to look for possibilities of obtaining funding from British sources to start a meeting place.

The unofficial spokesman continued: "I'm sorry we cannot be named yet until something concrete takes place. But we are looking into various possibilities, including the hiring of school premises on weekends to start our language, silat and Malay classes."

--BERNAMA

WAH MAD ANA