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Urgent need for Malaysia's rapid response team

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WASHINGTON DC: A journalist here is having a tough time selling his story to his editors. The story - the successful outcome of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to the White House at the invitation of US President George W. Bush.

It is tough for the journalist as it is a "positive" story. The meetings with various members of the Bush Cabinet went well. The president and other senior members of the Bush Administration were willing to listen to Dr Mahathir and to his ideas and explanations. In some instances the views that the Prime Minister expressed and articulated were different from those held by the Bush Administration, but they were given a hearing.

Bush in welcoming Dr Mahathir to the Oval Office said he "was looking forward to the visit to publicly thank the Prime Minister for his strong war against terror ... I want to thank you for your friendship. I want to thank you for your leadership".

Later, in a message to those attending the US-Asean Business Council dinner, Bush said "As a modern, moderate and prosperous Muslim state, Malaysia is an important example to the region and the rest of the world."

This positive development did not make for "good" copy. It did not have the ingredients of condemnation of the Malaysian leader and his policies.

In fact, some observers pointed out that the "poor" coverage and column inches in the American media could be concluded to mean that the outcome of the visit was a success. If it had been a failure, you can rest assured there would have been much more write-ups, analyses and commentaries and certainly many more column inches.

Even the speech at the US-Asean Business Council, which was interrupted by at least four applauses and one for which Dr Mahathir received a five-minute standing ovation, was misreported. The reports were out of context and those who were not at the dinner to hear the Prime Minister for themselves would not know the real message that was delivered and intended.

It prompted a "friend of Malaysia" to send copies of the speech to a number of editorial boards around the country with a note that they should read the full text. There is a story in the speech, he said adding that however it is not what has been reported in the media.

Then again some networks, which chose to report on the visit, did so based on "impressions" of their journalists in Washington DC. One headline read "Malaysian PM attacks West's `impatience'." If the speech is read in its context, Dr Mahathir was certainly not attacking the West but seeking their understanding and patience, which can go a long way in understanding of each other.

"People tend to respond more positively to the friendly approach than to confrontations. Pushed into a corner, even the weakest will fight," he had said.

Bush and his team listened and appreciated Malaysia's views, actions and measures taken by Malaysia in dealing with terrorism and terrorists. "The US Government seems to understand the problems we faced in Malaysia," the Prime Minister said.

"It is not as easy as saying merely we should not abuse certain provisions of the law. We had to do things that were for the good of the country but may not sound right, that may be termed `abuses of power'."

Unlike most reports which continue to say "Since September 11, Malaysia

has arrested many suspected Islamic militants..." Kuala Lumpur has been vigilant and been taking action long before the September 11 attack.

Malaysia provided key intelligence about al-Qaeda activities throughout South-East Asia, according to FBI director Robert Mueller. This, however, is not "known" or conveniently ignored in media reports.

Dr Mahathir impressed upon his host and Bush agreed on the need to discuss the root causes of terrorism, a hopelessness that leaves young people vulnerable to terrorist recruiters. He cautioned that simply trying to quash terrorists would be ineffective.

"While we must never excuse them for their counter-productive acts, we must nevertheless try to defuse their anger and the causes for it," Dr Mahathir said. "I am afraid the world is not doing this. Our view is that we must remove the causes of their bitterness and anger also." This is in keeping with Dr Mahathir's medical training that calls for a diagnosis and then the prescription to deal with the ailment.

"If there's a hopeless future, there may be an opportunity to convert them into potential suiciders or potential killers, and that's what I think we need to talk about," Bush added.

The two leaders did not just "talk" about it but discussed "the need to tackle the causes of terrorism ... that plagues the whole world, not just the US," Bush said, adding "We share a deep concern about terror - what terror means to our respective countries, what it means to our peoples".

The two countries signed a joint declaration to counter international terrorism to formalise the cooperation that has already been taking place between the two countries.

Dr Mahathir's visit, at the invitation of President Bush, has opened up the "locked potential". If last week's showing of about 300 corporate executives was any indication, business interest in Malaysia remains as strong with investor confidence in the country high.

Malaysia has been one of the more economically successful countries in the region. While neighbouring countries in South-East Asia were adversely affected by the 1997-1998 financial crisis and the situation made worse by the "remedies and IMF solutions", Malaysia's economy bounced back faster and stronger as a result of the unorthodox policies and underlying strong fundamentals.

Malaysia is the US' 11th largest trading partner and the 17th largest export market. Last year exports to the US accounted for US\$17.9 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80) while imports from the US to Malaysia stood at US\$11.8 billion. Malaysia is a major destination for American exports as it sells more to Malaysians than it does to Russians, Indians and Indonesians combined.

Even as the bilateral relations have been put on the "right track" or even "on the fast track", there is still a lot of potential that can be tapped. An observer pointed out that "For Malaysia, the US has always been important, but 9-11 has made the US see that it can learn a lot from Malaysia to deal with terrorists". What has not been said is that there is a lot more, beyond terrorism, that the US can learn from Malaysia.

While this may be so, an official said Malaysia and its leadership suffers from "the sins of omission" by the media. There is hardly any positive news. Malaysians themselves are "too polite", "too shy" and do not tell their success story nor their achievements. Malaysians and the leadership are very much misunderstood.

Malaysia not only suffers from the "sins of omission" but also lacks "a rapid response team" that can take the bull by the horns, constantly and repeatedly meet with "People on the Hill", media and opinion makers to spread the basic truth about Malaysia in the US. In short, there is a critical need for institutional building in DC - where the decisions are

made and opinions shaped.

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