

# Ambassador Noor Farida is a busy bee in The Hague

NS T 2 8/12/03

“SIX big bottles of Dettol and the biggest pack of Milo please,” she reminded her niece who was checking the list of items that would be taken back to The Hague.

“It’s much cheaper to get these things here and some items we can’t get there like *kicap*. I’m getting some things for my staff as well.”

Datuk Noor Farida Ariffin, who exudes a commanding presence, was at her sister’s home in Ampang during the Hari Raya holidays.

Finally settling down for the interview, Noor Farida said: “Following the Sixth Review Conference (of the CWC) and the Annual Conference of State Parties, things are going on very smoothly.”

Straight-talking, vocal and with an undeniable passion for her work lined with a steely determination belying her friendly and approachable disposition, Ambassador Noor Farida is Malaysia’s permanent representative at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

With Malaysia already elected to represent the Asian Group on the 41-member executive council (EC) of the OPCW and sit on the EC next May, Noor Farida wears many hats and has a lot, on her plate but it does not faze her at all.

The Asian Group had endorsed overwhelmingly her candidature as chair at its meeting on Oct 7.

Support from outside the group grew when Noor Farida showed her mettle at the First Review Conference held from April 28 to May 9 when she chaired the drafting group for Political Declaration Review and earned the respect of all delegates.

Noor Farida simply put it down to being even-handed in chairing the drafting sessions.

“Malaysia has been elected to the Executive Council which is the second highest decision-making body (within the organisation).”

Only becoming a state party in

It is a never-ending job being the Malaysian Ambassador to the Netherlands, chairman of the conference of signatory countries to the Chemical Weapons Convention and attending to other Malaysian duties at The Hague. Datuk Noor Farida Ariffin, who returned home for Hari Raya, managed to find time to talk to SUJATANI POOSPARAJAH.

May 2000, she said it is a major responsibility and a great honour for Malaysia which will take up the post in May for a two-year term.

Taking on her duties both as a seasoned diplomat and head of the CWC, Noor Farida admits that the drafting group for the review conference held this year had discussed many contentious issues and getting some State parties to come to a consensus was challenging.

On how Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad’s statement about the Jews in his speech at the 10th OIC Summit affected Malaysia, Noor Farida said:

“It caused a worldwide furore and

Dutch MP who vilified Prophet Muhammad.

“The OIC ambassador met us over this and we decided to send a memorandum to the leader of the MP’s party asking for an apology for injuring the feelings of 1.5 billion Muslims.

“We also sent a copy of this memorandum to the leaders of the other political parties.”

“It was leaked to the Press and we were subjected to a lot of criticism, some of them downright insulting.

“Some said, ‘Oh, you represent a country where there is no democracy’, and that we do not respect the right

**The situation has become so absurd that even to point out historical fact such as the fact that the creation of Israel led to the majority of the Palestinians being driven from their homeland is to risk being labelled anti-Semitic.’ — Noor Farida**

the embassy has been very busy responding to the letters and the negative reports in the Press. Dr Mahathir had been quoted out of context.

“One very pertinent question we asked is why is it acceptable to criticise and castigate the Muslims and not the Jews?”

“I said why do people in the West get hysterical when the Jews are criticised but the response is totally different when it comes to Muslims being criticised,” she said.

She said there was the case of a

of freedom of speech.”

Noor Farida said the former Prime Minister was also exercising his right to free speech. “So, why all the fuss?”

“Neither Tun Dr Mahathir nor the Malaysian Government has anything to apologise for. Why have the Jews become the sacred cow of the West?”

“The situation has become so absurd that even to point out a historical fact that the creation of Israel had led to majority of the Palestinians being driven from their homeland is to risk being labelled anti-Semitic.

“Dr Mahathir was only speaking the truth and the only difference between him and a lot of other world leaders is that he has got the guts.

“I am very encouraged by the fact that it is very easy to be a Malaysian diplomat as we can speak our mind.

“We have the courage of our conviction and we, unlike a lot of my colleagues, are able to give our views without fear or favour because we are beholden to nobody.”

Stating that her appointment came at a very awkward time with all the criticism levelled against Dr Mahathir’s view, Malaysia was nevertheless nominated unanimously by the Asian Group.

“It is because of our very balanced position. We take a very moderate, balanced and very principled position on many issues.”

She added that Malaysia was well respected within the OCPW notwithstanding the fact that some parties in the Asian Group were “very disparate making it difficult to agree on anything or get a consensus on some of the more difficult issues”.

“It is a huge compliment for us and an expression of their confidence in Malaysia from all the regional groups.”

There was never a shadow of bias cast upon Malaysia’s chairmanship, she said.

“It was not an issue within the organisation. Perhaps it was our own perception. We were quite worried but apparently it was a non-issue.”

A person who believes in the power and importance of teamwork, one of the challenges she faced was when she had to amicably resolve the issue over the dismissal of the organisation’s director-general, Jose Bustani.

He was dismissed just after one year of his second term and won his case when he pursued the matter with the International Labour Organisation.

It was decided, she said, that the case would go back to the ILO for a

review of the material damages awarded to Bustani on account of new facts.

Noor Farida said the aim of the CWC was the elimination of chemical weapons and chemical weapons facilities.

“The purpose of this organisation is to oversee all these chemical weapons and the other chemicals countries possess.”

She noted that the Oklahoma bombing was the result of simple chemical fertilisers being used.

Noor Farida said a large chunk of the CWS budget would go towards inspection and verification exercises as well as inspections where non-compliance to conventions would result in economic sanctions.

She said the International Co-operation and Assistance Programme assisted countries in meeting the obligations under the convention.

The OPCW, she said, had also sent a team to Malaysia and conducted a training session in September for the national authority that oversees the implementation of the convention.

“We hope to follow up next year for

the chemical inspectors to make sure the chemical industries here comply with the provisions of the convention.”

Not only is she the bilateral ambassador to the Netherlands, permanent representative to the OPCW and currently the chairperson, Noor Farida is also the co-agent to the Pulau Batu Putih case, was co-agent to the Pulau Sipadan case, the government representative to the Permanent Court of Arbitration and represented the Government on the Conference of Private International Law.

“The Hague is an extremely busy place and on top of that, a major function for us is to promote trade and investment in the Netherlands,” she laughs.

And where does she get the energy?

“Oh we have to,” she said with her infectious laughter. “But I am very happy. I have efficient staff. We are a small embassy but we make optimal use of the small staff that we have.”

---

■ [psuja@nstp.com.my](mailto:psuja@nstp.com.my)