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Diplomat-Khatib
FROM DIPLOMAT TO RUNNING HOSPITALS

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, April 20 (Bernama) -- After 38 years as a diplomat, Tan Sri Khatib Abdul Hamid retired in 2001 very much looking forward to a quiet life and spending more time with his children and grandchildren.

But to his surprise, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last year appointed him to head two key institutions, chairman of both the National Heart Institute (IJN) and the University of Malaya, the country's first university now 40 years old.

"From a diplomat, I'm now running two hospitals in one go," says Khatib in an interview with Bernama.

The IJN is the nation's premier heart hospital, while the university also runs Universiti Malaya Medical Centre, formerly known as Universiti Hospital, one of Malaysia's biggest hospitals.

At the recent 10th anniversary celebration of IJN, Dr Mahathir told Khatib to continue to make the heart hospital affordable to the needy, the primary objective for setting the hospital in the first place.

IJN is one institution perhaps closest to Dr Mahathir's heart, literally speaking. It was set up as a separate hospital to take over the old Coronary Unit of the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital where the prime minister himself underwent a by-pass operation in 1989.

Speaking at the IJN anniversary function, Dr Mahathir touched everyone's heart when he said that he owed his life to IJN, whose present chief executive officer, Datuk Dr Yahya Awang, was the chief surgeon who operated on him.

For Khatib, it was his 10 years as Malaysia's Ambassador to Japan until 1999 that he really got to know Dr Mahathir better than perhaps most of his fellow diplomats serving in other countries.

Japan is probably one foreign country that Dr Mahathir visits more often than any other and according to Khatib, it was the prime minister who made a "breakthrough" in the way Japan looks at its relations with the rest of Asia.

"After the war, the Japanese think that Asians were angry with them because of the war and here comes a leader (in Dr Mahathir) who says, forget about what you did in the war, think of now. Get it over with and you show by your contributions in Asia and your participation in Asia," says Khatib.

And the Japanese responded by investing in a very big way in Malaysia and elsewhere in the region.

But Khatib says it was Dr Mahathir's "Look East Policy" under which Malaysians were told to learn from Japan, especially their work ethics, their entrepreneurship and their zest to go for perfection, that "really won the Japanese hearts".

"The fact that we are sending thousands of our students there won the Japanese hearts. Dr Mahathir is someone who is recognised by even the Japanese public. The recognition of Dr Mahathir is much more than of their own prime ministers," he says.

Khatib, who accompanied the prime minister for visits all over Japan during his 10 years as ambassador, says Dr Mahathir is a person who sets aside protocol and ceremonies.

"He wants to learn and he learns from taking a ride on public trains, no special coach. We went on big buses, subways, we walked, no protocol."

Another country that Khatib admits to having a special liking for is

Indonesia, where he was ambassador for five years before his Tokyo posting.

And he says without trying to hide his feelings that he would get very upset everytime he reads media reports about some Malaysians mistreating Indonesians working in the country.

"We need the Indonesians and yet sometimes we mistreat them. Many who come here may be lowly-paid workers but they are not idiots. The fact that you pay them doesn't mean you must abuse their human dignity," he says.

Khatib is irked by the attitude of some Malaysians who are too materialistic, saying to these people, everything boils down to dollars and cents.

As he puts it: "There is such a thing as values and that's why the prime minister has come out with this 'Prosper Thy Neighbour' policy and everybody should be mindful of that."

"When we take in the Indonesians we are also contributing to their prosperity...at the same time they are contributing to our prosperity because we don't have enough workers. Many of our big projects would not have been completed without the Indonesian workers.

"Now some of us arrogantly say that if the Indonesians don't want to come anymore, we'll take workers from Vietnam, China...what is this? The Indonesians are different, they are our neighbours and they are the hardest workers," he says.

And Khatib cites the Quran which says that when helping others in need, Muslims should consider their neighbours above their own families.

"The trouble with some Malaysians is that they are arrogant and they regard themselves as rich but let's not forget that there are lots of us who are not. I always say that we cannot choose our neighbours and so we have to live with our neighbours.

"We cannot be rich always, who can be sure that we will always be rich? Now just look at so many of our graduates who are unemployed," he says.

Khatib says he aims to make a difference at both the IJN and University of Malaya (UM) by pursuing his lifelong philosophy of giving his best shot in whatever he does.

He also already announced plans to add another 200 beds to ease congestion at the 250-bed IJN under a RM200 million project also aimed at making it one of the world's best heart hospitals.

And he wants University of Malaya, which also happens to be his alma mater, to continue to be recognised as the premier university in the country.

"The government has expressed concern about the quality of graduates. In the UM, this concern is recognised by everybody and we want to continue to be the premier university. But the UM is big, it has 30,000 students and it is old. It's a 40-year-old lady."

Khatib says he has noticed that there are people at the university who are afraid of change and he attributes this to people who themselves do not want to change and so they try to stop change.

His plans at the university include attracting what he calls "international brains".

"At the same time you must create the environment that caters for international brains to come here, people want to be comfortable to come and share their brains in the campus where the environment is international...not the environment that is too Islamic and too Malay," says Khatib with utter frankness.

He says there is a lot of catching up to do in education as many graduates are not that marketable anymore. He is particularly concerned about the Malay graduates because of their lack of English.

"They are finding it difficult to find jobs, especially in the private sector where people are doing things in English. People are saying we have

lost a generation (in English)," he says.

On Islam, Khatib says what happens in the Islamic heartland, the Arab-speaking countries, is a matter that saddens all Muslims.

"They can't even reach unity...and some of the Arab states have American military bases. Without the help of the Arabs, the Americans wouldn't have been able to launch the war against Iraq in the first place. If Kuwait doesn't allow the U.S. in, and if the command centre is not in Qatar, the war wouldn't have been launched..they can't launch the war from America."

Khatib says Muslims in Malaysia should learn a lesson from the Iraq War, a lesson that they must never be divided.

He also considers serving the two hospitals as "amal jariah" (religious duty) for old age, saying just a few days ago he decided to forgive the unsettled accounts of many poor patients who owed the University of Malaya Medical Centre.

And one of the things he relishes doing now that he has finally come home after nearly 40 years in the diplomatic service, is to drive a granddaughter to and from school.

"Excuse me, we'll have to end here as I have to fetch my granddaughter from school," says the 65-year-old grandfather Khatib.

-- BERNAMA

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