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Palestinian with a Malaysian bent

By Balan Moses

THE days have grown much longer for Palestinian Ambassador to Malaysia, Ahmad Al Farra, since the Israelis began their aggression in the little township of Khanyounis on the Gaza Strip last week.

He dreads reading the casualty list over the Internet after every attack: they could contain the names of dear ones, including brothers, sisters and cousins.

"It is an emotional moment when you see the list of casualties and wonder when the names of your close relatives might appear on it. I feel a sense of helplessness being here and unable to do anything about the problem," he says in an interview at his embassy.

It is a burden that the tall and soft-spoken envoy, nevertheless, carries well, given the larger responsibility he bears in informing the world of the carnage at home.

Yet, this does not detract from the point that his family home where he grew up may invariably join the quarter of the town that has already become part of the destruction of war.

This is probably why he has spent the better part of his life informing the world at large of the Palestinian right to live in peace and dignity and an end to the bloodshed that has dogged them for more than half a century.

It began many years ago in the campus of University of Alexandria, Egypt, when he joined underground activists seeking a homeland for Palestinians.

The young Al Farra graduated to the Al Fattah arm of the PLO in 1967 before gaining seniority in the organisation that later took him to Beirut as a freedom fighter.

At first glance, the silver-haired and soft spoken Al Farra appears to be an unlikely candidate for the arduous task ahead of him.

But as the interview gathers momentum, it becomes clear why the Palestinian leadership has placed its implicit trust in the 58-year-old envoy: his dedication to the cause is unquestionable.

His temperament is similar to that of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat who manages to maintain a smile even in the most inclement political weather.

The governor in the Palestinian Interior Ministry, a post he was assigned to after the intifada or uprising began in 2002, is regularly on the telephone with Arafat.

"I speak to him once a day or thereabouts. It is usually about 5am here which is about 11pm in Palestine. I get his views to convey them to the Malaysian Government," he says of the calls which have become more frequent of late.

The reason is the Ministerial Meeting of the Non-Aligned Nations (NAM) to be held in Putrajaya on May 13 and what it will mean to the Palestinians.

Al Farra says Arafat is anxious that fresh moves be initiated to get the entire weight of the movement and the Organisation of Islamic Conference behind the cause.

His immediate agenda is to persuade OIC and NAM nations into imposing trade sanctions and withdrawal of political recognition of Israel besides coming out with communiques and resolutions.

"Two days ago he (Arafat) sent a note to Prime Minister Datuk Seri

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar thanking them for Malaysia's contributions to the Palestinian cause."

Arafat and Abdullah are friends, he says, the relationship going back to the 1990s when the Prime Minister was Foreign Minister and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was at the helm.

The Embassy of the State of Palestine, tucked away at the end of a cul-de-sac in a side road off Jalan Ampang, is where Al Farra plans strategies with Malaysia to alleviate the sufferings of Palestinians.

The occasional hunter is a journeyman as far as ambassadorial duties are concerned, traversing the difficult road of diplomacy since 1975 when he went to Pakistan as an untested 29-year-old Palestinian Liberation Organisation envoy.

He has come a long way since then, having gone on to Kabul after that before arriving in Kuala Lumpur in 1982.

It was an active six years here for the father of two - his daughter Maha was born in Kuala Lumpur - before 1988 arrived and thoughts of returning home filled his mind.

But it was not to be.

Arafat had other plans for the enterprising Al Farra who had by then captured the attention of (then Prime Minister) Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Malaysians with his passion for his homeland.

What sealed his fate as far as Malaysia is concerned - he has been here for 22 years - was a fateful telephone conversation with Arafat which led to him putting down roots here.

As Al Farra, who has a knack of narrating stories from his colourful past, says, it was 4am in Algeria where Palestinian statehood had finally been achieved when the telephone rang in the embassy (10am here) in Kuala Lumpur.

"It was Arafat with the good news that the moment had finally arrived for Palestine and that Malaysia had almost immediately recognised the new country."

This was news that the then 36-year-old envoy had been expecting and should have been a signal that it was time to go home to familiar terrain and family.

Instead, it led to him putting down roots and becoming a familiar face in the diplomatic enclave here.

Arafat's brief to Al Farra was simple: stay on and continue with what you have been doing but in the new capacity of ambassador.

Arafat had, however, committed a faux pas by asking where Al Farra was, assuming that he had left Malaysia after completing his term here.

"I told him that I had never left. And the rest is history, he says.

The longest-staying head of mission in Malaysia was the dean of the diplomatic corps for six years until 2000 when he handed over duties to the then Mexican Ambassador "as there was no sign of me being transferred."

Another of his tales revolves around how he became the first, and probably only, ambassador to present his credentials to a Malaysian Prime Minister.

It appears he could not present his credentials in 1982 to the then Yang di Pertuan Agong because of a technical problem.

"I met Tun Dr Mahathir at a function and explained to him that I had been unable to present my credentials despite being here for a month.

He told me to see him and I presented my credentials to him not too long after."

The bespectacled father of two, who is also accredited to the Philippines, may have over the years become as Malaysian as one can be but his heart is still in Palestine.

Al Farra says his son Maher, now 23, a student in Canada, and Maha, 20, speak very poor Arabic as they are more proficient in Bahasa Malaysia.

"When I visit him in Canada, he invariably takes me to a Malaysian restaurant there as he longs for "local food," he says.

He added that his children preferred to break fast with Malaysian delicacies here rather than having traditional Palestinian food.

Given Al Farra's extensive experience in Malaysia (the chairman of NAM and OIC), it does not appear likely that he will be up for transfer anytime in the near future.

Al Farra finds time between appointments to indulge in a bit of equestrian activities at the Polo Club "where I used to meet Dr Mahathir sometimes."

What are his plans as he nears his fourth decade working for the Palestinian cause and his second decade in Malaysia?

"I plan to write a book of my experiences in Malaysia.

"I have a lot of stories to tell. It's all there lurking somewhere in my mind," he says, adding that wife, Sawsen, shares his love for Malaysia.

And what a winner of a book it is likely to be, coming from an author destined for a key role in what may be the most important political cause of the century.

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