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Working together for benefit of all in Antarctica

By Dzul kifli Abdul Razak

IT all started in 1983 when then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed brought up the issue at the United Nations. The concern was that Antarctica was being monopolised by a handful of nations with territorial ambitions.

In fact, some nations claimed sovereignty in Antarctica, leading to threats of war. Malaysia's message to the UN was that Antarctica should belong to all humankind and should be preserved and protected for the benefit of everyone.

Soon after, in 1985, the first Malaysian set foot on the continent and later the South Pole. From then on there was no turning back and the Malaysian Antarctic Research Programme was established in 1999 to help Malaysians to embark on Antarctica research.

The programme received support not only from the Government but was also backed by a number of Antarctica-related agencies in Australia, New Zealand, Argentina and South Africa.

At the Second Malaysia International Seminar on Antarctica, Malaysia received many more offers of assistance from countries like Sweden, Germany, India, Britain and Russia.

Indeed, Dr Mahathir himself, accompanied by his wife, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, three Cabinet Ministers and a delegation of 70 people, set sail for Antarctica in early 2002 via Argentina.

They were the first First Couple from a developing or Muslim country to visit Antarctica. They symbolically dared Malaysians to take up the Antarctic challenge, both for adventure as well as for science.

The Antarctic Treaty of Dec 1, 1959, grew out of the International Geophysical Year (July 1, 1957-Dec 31, 1958) and was intended to assure that the only human activity there was restricted to science and technology.

Thus, the treaty was specifically designed to preserve the continent of Antarctica, along with all other land and water south of latitude 60, for peaceful purposes, particularly scientific research.

The Antarctic Treaty was first signed by 12 countries that had maintained research stations on the continent during the International Geophysical Year.

They were Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the United Kingdom and the United States.

By 1996, 41 nations, representing more than 80 per cent of the earth's population, had signed the treaty. Of these, 27 nations were full voting members of the treaty organisation.

Provisions of the treaty can be changed only by unanimous agreement of the voting members.

The treaty also bans any military operations, use of nuclear weapons, or disposal of radioactive waste in Antarctica; encourages the free exchange of information from scientific research conducted there; and forbids nations from making any new territorial claims on the continent.

It, however, made no ruling on existing territorial claims.

With a supplementary Protocol on Environmental Protection, the treaty was later extended to protect marine life within the Antarctic ecosystem and to prohibit mining activity for a 50-year period beginning 1991.

Resulting from this understanding, the participating nations declared a

moratorium on political differences.

Instead, most chose to work together in Antarctica, for example, in the study of sunspot activity and its effects on the earth and its atmosphere.

The studies led to important scientific discoveries, especially the discovery decades later of a hole in the ozone layer, the part of the atmosphere that protects all living things from harmful rays of the sun.

It is a fine example of international collaboration for mutual benefit. Many more are being undertaken collaboratively across nations and cultures.

Indeed, the breakneck advance of today's science and technology is largely due to close rapport among scientists not only from different disciplines but also from a variety of different cultural backgrounds uninhibited by manmade boundaries and ideologies.

The theme for the Second Malaysia International Seminar, "Global Laboratory for Scientific and International Co-operation", was therefore very appropriate and highly significant.

It clearly demonstrated the desire and enthusiasm among scientists and participants to exploit their collective wisdom so that the most pristine part of our world is better understood and protected.

Antarctica, considered by many to be the last frontier, is certainly a good place and reason for all of us to do this.

It should promote not just excellent science and research, but equally important international understanding that would bring about lasting peace, goodwill and prosperity.

This is perhaps one very unique opportunity for all of us to show the relevance of science to the larger mission of bridging whatever gaps there are in making the world a better place to live in.

It is an opportunity to promote the message of peace through science in a world plagued by so much violence.

\* The Second Malaysia International Seminar on Antarctica was held over three days last week. Organised by Universiti Sains Malaysia, Akademi Sains Malaysia and supported by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, it attracted many distinguished scientists and researchers from a dozen countries, some of whom have been involved in research for more than 50 years. Malaysia is the first Asean nation to be involved in this challenging endeavour. To date, more than 35 Malaysian scientists have stepped on the so-called "White Continent".

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