

22/08/2004

Getting on ahead after the Malaysian posting

By Balan Moses

MALAYSIA appears to be an ideal destination for a first posting as envoy and an excellent springboard for more senior appointments later.

Judging from the inordinate number of first-timers arriving here in the recent past, Malaysia must surely hold a record in this respect.

Several heads of mission posted here over the past two years have come on promotion while others have left to pursue their careers elsewhere with the added benefit of the Malaysian experience.

There appears to be a consensus that Malaysia has all the ingredients for a successful posting: a strategic position in international geopolitics, a healthy political climate, an efficient bureaucracy, a largely English-speaking population and enviable infrastructure.

Coupled with many other vestiges of the 21st century, this makes the nation an almost perfect host country for diplomats.

The diplomatic circle in Kuala Lumpur abounds with talk of how Malaysia is a posting courted by many but granted to few.

For some countries, Malaysia is an ideal place for middle-rank diplomats to fine-tune their skills before proceeding to larger nations.

Diplomats here feel that Malaysia's chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organisation of Islamic Conference has also boosted its image abroad.

This has raised Malaysia's importance in the international arena by a few notches, especially in terms of the general agenda of the Islamic world and the Third World.

According to them, Malaysia was already making waves in international circles during the administration of former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who was generally seen as the spokesman for the developing world.

But Malaysia's importance became even more apparent after its assumed chairmanship of the two international bodies whose combined membership represented a sizeable portion of the composition of the United Nations.

Malaysia also holds an additional allure for many nations wanting to understand the dynamics of a modern Muslim-majority nation.

This is more so for Europeans who are quickly appreciating the need to understand Islam from a nation like Malaysia which has succeeded in walking the acceptable middle path.

First-time ambassador Eugeniusz Sawicki, Polish envoy to Malaysia, is extremely happy to be in Kuala Lumpur which has met his every need since he arrived.

Unlike his previous postings which, among others, saw him in the thick of fighting in Somalia and in tense situations in the Balkans in the early 1990s, his stay in Malaysia has been free of problems.

Sawicki and his wife, Wislawa, love the roads, the people and the fabric of Malaysian society.

These are the same sentiments of Gambian High Commissioner Neville Gertze who could not agree more that Malaysia is a ready-made destination for all levels of diplomats.

Probably the youngest envoy in Kuala Lumpur, the 38-year-old is thankful for his posting to a country that stood by his fledgling nation after its independence from South Africa.

He says there is a lot to learn from a nation that has easily been among the most outspoken in the cause of the fight against apartheid.

Sudanese Ambassador Abdel Rahman Hamzah Elraya and Senegalese Ambassador

Amadou Faye agree that Malaysia is an ideal posting for first-time envoys.

In their case, both are from Muslim countries that have been closely associated with the OIC and need to maintain a good working relationship with the current OIC chairman.

Being members of the OIC troika also makes it imperative for them to maintain close links with Malaysia.

For Shafie U. Ahmad, the posting to Malaysia as first-time ambassador was a move tailor-made for the former head of administration in the Bangladesh Foreign Service.

Given the fact, by his own admission, that things were not going as well as they should for the mission here, he was sent to Kuala Lumpur to improve the situation.

The need to repair the situation, notwithstanding, he sees Malaysia as a "prized posting" for diplomats, especially those from Bangladesh.

For Cuban Ambassador Pedro Monzon Barata, a first-timer who has had some Asian experience - having been the second man at the mission in Tokyo - Malaysia is the ideal destination for envoys.

He says the healthy relationship between the two countries, thanks to the personal friendship forged between Dr Mahathir and President Fidel Castro, makes his job a little easier.

The list of those who have gone on to better things is also impressive.

Former Czech Republic Ambassador to Malaysia Dr Vitezslav Grepl, for one, is today his country's Ambassador to China. By his own admission, it was one of the top five ambassadorial postings for diplomats from his country.

Diplomatic observers say Grepl distinguished himself so well in Malaysia that the posting to China was inevitable.

Then there was former Indian High Commissioner to Malaysia Veena Sikri who left to serve as High Commissioner to Bangladesh after a most successful outing in Malaysia.

Bangladesh, being an immediate neighbour, ranks very high in terms of diplomatic ties for India and only senior foreign service officials are sent there.

The significance of her posting to Bangladesh is clearer from the fact that she was her country's consul-general to Hong Kong before coming to Malaysia.

Former United States Ambassador to Malaysia, Marie Huhtala, is another example.

As Deputy Assistant Secretary for Asian and Pacific Affairs in the US State Department today, she is in a position to influence policy, to a fair degree, on Asia.

Many believe that Huhtala's time in Malaysia have given her the ideal exposure needed to handle the Asian and Pacific affairs portfolio.

Her enviable resume includes her posting as deputy head of mission in Bangkok prior to Malaysia.

Malaysia was an ideal debut for Sri Lanka's Rosy Senanayake who was recalled recently by a new Government back home. Coming to Kuala Lumpur without any foreign service experience, the political appointee found her posting "the experience of a lifetime which I will never forget".

The novice envoy probably found the going easier than most diplomats given the fact that many Malaysians knew of the former Miss World well before her arrival.

Besides the first-timers, there are also those who have served here before as deputy heads of missions or in other senior positions.

British High Commissioner Bruce Cleghorn, for example, had benefited from an earlier stint here as deputy High Commissioner in the early 1990s.

Then, there is the new German Ambassador to Malaysia, Herbert Gess, who returns to a familiar environment after a stint in Manila as ambassador. Gess, who took over from Jurgen Staks on Aug 5, is an old Malaysia hand, having served here as deputy head of mission.

There is a unexpected benefit for the nation from being the "training ground" for diplomats, which is the growing pool of goodwill ambassadors for Malaysia in high places all over the world.

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