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Going against the grain to win the peace

Yong Tiam Kui

IN his fifth and most recent book Wira Tak Didendang (Unsung Heroes,) Deputy Minister of Information and former journalist Datuk Zainuddin Maidin paid special tribute to former Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Rahim Noor and former Special Branch Deputy Director Datuk Yaw Kong Yre (left) for the roles they played in the surrender of the Communist Party of Malaya. YONG TIAM KUI met Yaw to get this side of the story.

AFTER serving in the Special Branch for 28 years in 1983, Datuk Yaw Kong Yew had had enough. He was calling it quits.

But, the hand of fate decided otherwise. His application for optional retirement was rejected and he went on to play a pivotal role in the dissolution of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) in 1989.

It was a role that Yaw would not have thought of in his wildest dreams.

He had spent practically his entire career in the Special Branch fighting the CPM. He had studied, interrogated and rehabilitated countless hardcore Communists.

Offering them the olive branch had never been an option.

Yaw, who was serving as Senior Assistant Commissioner II and heading the Special Branch division that handled the Communist threat at the time, recalls how shocked he was when Tan Sri Rahim Noor first brought up the idea of negotiating a peaceful end to the CPM problem in mid-1987.

"Before I could even get seated properly, he said he had given it a great deal of thought and he was going to finish the CPM problem once and for all peacefully through negotiations.

"I was stunned! The thought that went through my mind was this. `You're so new. This is a very complex problem that even the British couldn't solve. You are going to tell the generals that they have been doing things the wrong way? This could jeopardise your career!'

"We got on very well. So as a concerned friend I said, `Datuk do you really dare to do this? You will be branded a Communist!'," he adds.

Yaw says Rahim's appointment as Special Branch Director in 1986 had come as a shock to many people because he had no Special Branch experience.

Traditionally, only individuals who had served in the Special Branch were ever appointed to that post.

"Many people tried to tembak him because he didn't have Special Branch experience."

And, barely a year into his job, Rahim was advocating peace talks with the CPM - an idea that was almost certainly going to be anathema to the rank and file of the Special Branch, the police and the army.

After all, the Communist Insurgency which began in 1948 had claimed the lives of thousands of Malaysians, most of them soldiers and policemen, in particular Special Branch officers.

Internationally, the Communist movement had lost all relevance with the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

On the home front, the 1,000-strong CPM was confined to thick jungles in Selangor, Perak, Pahang and southern Thailand.

To many, it look like the CPM's days were numbered.

It was felt that the CPM could either lay down its arms voluntarily or hang on till it was eliminated by the Malaysian armed forces.

"Traditionally, as members of the armed forces, police and Special Branch, our job is to fight, eliminate and secure the capitulation of enemies.

"To talk about starting negotiations is a sign of weakness; you are losing the battle. When you're winning, you don't talk about negotiations. They can either surrender or become irrelevant."

But, Rahim, an economist by training, managed to convince Yaw of the wisdom of his proposal by pointing out the fact that the huge sums of money wasted on fighting the Communists could be used to help the poor instead.

Yaw says he felt "instant empathy" with Rahim when he said that because he himself came from a very poor family.

"He started shooting questions at me. 'Do you know how many troops are deployed along the border between Thailand and Malaysia and everywhere else?' He said we are contented because we have the situation under control 'but nobody asks at what cost! It's a total waste of money!'

"He said this is the corporate way of doing things. We have to look at the cost and time frame involved. It can't go on forever. He said he can find a way to solve it peacefully and divert the funds to raise the living standards of the poor.

"With his management skills and my experience fighting hardcore Communists, he said, we can work something out. He said he would talk to the PM and the generals. 'All I ask of you is to bring the CPM leaders to the negotiating table."

Yaw says he had to ask for time to work out a road map because this new initiative of Rahim's involved a complete change of tactics. All that the Special Branch had done previously involved containment of the CPM. There was nothing in the arsenal for a peace offensive. They were moving into uncharted waters.

"I told him I would do my best but don't think I can perform miracles because of my 30 years experience with the Communists."

The first thing they did, says Yaw, was to make a quick trip to Bangkok and southern Thailand because he needed to look up his old Thai contacts and sound them out on the possibility of making peace with the CPM.

They were fortunate because the Thais were also thinking along similar lines after failing to crush the CPM militarily in 1986.

"It took them a whole year to learn that they couldn't do it. They had a lot of casualties because the CPM had learnt landmine warfare so well from their Vietnamese counterparts. So, they came to the same conclusion. They already had a code name for it - Peace in the South."

After spending several weeks wining and dining and socialising with Thai officers in Bangkok and southern Thailand, Yaw says, he collected a lot of very useful information.

With that in hand, they were ready to brief the Prime Minister. To their relief, they found a very receptive audience in Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"PM didn't raise any objections. He said go ahead, get back to me if you bump into any obstacles. We went back to him very often. I have to say he gave us unwavering support from beginning to end."

The big break came when Yaw heard from the Thais that Chang Lin Yun, Chin Peng's second-in-command who was known as Siao Chang (little Chang), had agreed to seek treatment in Haadyai, courtesy of the Thai Government, because he was very sick.

But, just as he received that bit of heartening news, Yaw also got wind of some very bad news. There were rumours going round among the Thais that he did not represent either the Special Branch or the Malaysian Government. In fact, they said, he was merely an over-ambitious Special Branch officer out to do something spectacular to advance his career.

This could have jeopardised the entire mission but Yaw managed to quash the rumours by simply having pictures taken with the PM and Rahim and distributing them among the Thais.

"It was frightening. If the Communists had heard this they would never be willing to come out and talk to me. I told Rahim the most effective way to deal with this was for us to take pictures with the PM and distribute them to the Thais.

"On my next trip to southern Thailand, I made it a point to give a whole stack of pictures to the guy who had told me about the rumours and said, 'Please distribute these to all those people who are spreading the rumour'," Yaw adds.

He finally met Chang in Haadyai in August 1988. A firm believer in the Chinese adage, 'If you know yourself and you know your enemy, you can fight a hundred battles and win a hundred battles', Yaw prepared himself thoroughly. He researched all available information on the man.

Chang was a former school teacher, veteran Communist and very knowledgeable in Marxist theory and ideology. He had lived in China for many years, had extensive international exposure and had attended many conferences in China and Moscow.

"I knew this was either going to make or break my mission. I told him, 'I know your background very well and I respect you for that'. I went through his whole history.

"I told him, 'The problem is you may not know much about me. I have been appointed by the Malaysian Government to speak to you. I think that says a lot about my character and integrity'

"I told him, 'I don't expect you to believe me wholesale. If you have any doubts, you can refer to the Thais around you. I was supposed to retire but I was persuaded to stay on for two reasons. The chance to continue serving the country and if I had the opportunity, to help bring an end to the madness and killing of each other. It's time we called it a day'.

"I brought in the Mahathir factor. About how he was very strong politically, his farsightedness and his legendary boldness. And, how he had proven time and again that he was willing to take big political risks for the sake of the country.

"`You also have a Special Branch chief who mooted the idea in the first place. Baling took place in 1955. If you miss this opportunity, you may have to wait another 40 years'."

Yaw says Chang listened intently without a single interruption. He said he did not doubt that Yaw was telling him the truth but he could not give him a definite answer. It was a collective decision that would have to be left to the politburo of the CPM. He said it would take two or three months for him to come back with the answer.

Yaw says this is probably due to the fact that CPM couriers had to make an overland trip to get the message through to Chin Peng in China.

So, he tried to speed things up by offering to fly Chang to China. Chang said he would think about it.

Meanwhile, Rahim and Yaw decided to establish another line of communication directly with Chin Peng in case things got bogged down on Chang's side.

Rahim decided to get the help of Malaysian Chinese businessmen who had close ties with prominent leaders in the Chinese Communist Party.

He felt that Hong Kong-based magnate Tan Sri Robert Kuok was the best bet.

So, they contacted Kuok and through his good offices, Yaw met a high-ranking officer from the Chinese Liaison Department, which handles the affairs of expatriate communist residents in China, in Hong Kong.

"The first point he made was that the matter was entirely an internal affair of Malaysia. The second point he made was China's policy was not to interfere in the internal matters of any country. The third point was

China's policy of always being supportive of any move to solve conflict through peaceful means.

So, the Chinese Government was very happy to know that the Malaysian Government wanted to solve the CPM problem through peaceful means.

"He wanted to make sure that I had understood him because he repeated those points a second time. He said, 'you are on the right track. I think you will succeed if you have a little patience'. And then he left."

It was plain sailing after that, says Yaw. Chang accepted the offer to fly to China to see Chin Peng in Guangzhou and soon after the CPM politburo agreed in principle to hold peace talks with the Malaysian Government.

"They sent a woman called Ah Yen alias Zainon to liaise with me in Guangzhou. They wanted to know the preconditions, agenda, issues, who will be at the negotiations, where it will be held and how they will be treated.

"They had been treated very shabbily in Baling and they didn't want a repeat. I told Ah Yen, 'There are no preconditions. If you are not happy you can always walk away'."

In the meantime, Yaw offered to fly Chang to Kuala Lumpur General Hospital for treatment because the hospital in Haadyai was lacking in facilities and couldn't do much for him.

"Can you imagine? There was no peace accord. I could have ditangkap him. Rahim had sounded out Dr Mahathir already. I arranged all the travel documents and put him in a first class ward."

Unfortunately, the doctors at KLGH couldn't do anything for him because his cancer was already at a very advanced stage.

At that point, Yaw says, Chang asked for a favour. He wanted Yaw to take him along on his next trip to Guangzhou because he wanted to see his two sons whom he had not seen for many years and seek Chinese herbal treatment.

"I said I had to get permission. We went to see the PM and it was approved. I brought him personally to Guangzhou. I pushed his wheelchair all the way. When I handed him over to his Chinese handler, he turned back to thank me. There were tears running down his face. He was very touched by what I had done for him."

Five rounds of talks between the CPM and the Malaysian Government took place in Phuket; beginning in February 1989 and ending in November the same year.

Yaw says he was supposed to be on the Malaysian team but he decided to opt out just before the talks started. It turned out to be a fortuitous decision.

"I told Rahim I could not be on the team. I spent a lot of time and effort to build up the confidence of the CPM. There would be heated arguments. Temperatures would rise. I couldn't afford to lose their trust. Nobody could replace me.

"When I told Ah Yen I was not going to be on the Malaysian team and that I would function as liaison officer, troubleshooter, adviser or whatever you want to call it, she said in that case she would do the same thing.

"After that every time negotiations got bogged down, the two of us sorted things out."

Several very contentious issues were raised. CPM demands included: Recognition of the organisation as a legal political party, abolition of the Internal Security Act, demolition of the National Monument, no reference to be made to either surrender or capitulation on the part of the CPM in the agreement, the right of return and residence for CPM members, freedom from arrest or detention on their return, financial assistance for the first three years and the right to vote and form

political parties.

In the end all they got was this: Permission to return to Malaysia within one year of the signing of the agreement and a monthly allowance of RM300 from the Government for three years.

After the signing of the agreement between the CPM and the Malaysian Government in Haadyai on Dec 2, 1989, Yaw asked for permission to visit the CPM headquarters in southern Thailand.

Critics had alleged that the peace initiative was not necessary because the CPM was already on its last legs. Yaw wanted to see for himself if this was true.

"I wanted to see for myself their state of affairs. Some people said they were already dying of old age and their movement was collapsing.

"The other CPM leaders opposed it. They said, 'How can you allow a Special Branch officer in our headquarters'. Chin Peng was the one who stepped in. He received me with a lot of warmth. In fact everybody treated me so warmly. They all knew what I had done for their number two.

"I was very impressed by their morale. They were very well-organised and they had so many young people. Two Japanese soldier who were too ashamed to surrender to the British at the end of the Second World War were their armourers. Their home-made weapons were very impressive. I even had my dental check-up at their headquarters.

"I was there for three days and two nights. I'm glad I went because I have the photographs to show all those people who said the CPM members were all old and would have died in their sleep.

"I'll tell you frankly, I have very few friends. Many Special Branch officers refuse to speak to me because of what I did. They think it was wrong to negotiate because the CPM could have been defeated militarily. Of course, they are entitled to their own opinion."

Asked if he would have done anything differently with the gift of hindsight, Yaw says: "Absolutely nothing."

"Everything was done correctly to achieve the results we wanted."