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Huhtala sees ties on the upswing

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IT was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Charles Dickens' opening line in the Tale of Two Cities, perhaps, best reflects the situation that Marie Huhtala, the US Ambassador to Malaysia, found herself in when assuming office on Sept 30, 2001.

It was a mere 19 days after the cataclysmic events of Sept 11, probably the worst nightmare for Americans since Pearl Harbour took the nation into the Second World War.

The world, the US in particular, was in turmoil with Americans slowly emerging out their near catatonic state to get on with life despite the almost irreparable damage to their psyche.

US foreign relations with the Islamic world and beyond were in tatters in the aftermath of the attacks by terrorists.

It was a baptism of fire like none other for Huhtala on day one of her first term ever as ambassador.

The tragedy of the day notwithstanding, it would have been an ideal time for a diplomat to put into practice the skills honed over several decades.

Yet, it was also an experience no diplomat would probably ever covet: explaining the outrage and subsequent actions of a nation over a disaster of unheard of proportions.

Kuala Lumpur was no cakewalk for Huhtala after the arguably easier responsibilities of deputy chief of mission in Thailand, a traditional US ally with its own share of unique issues to be handled.

Her agenda for Malaysia had been put through the drier: nothing was the same any more.

"Before I arrived, I thought my priorities would revolve almost entirely around trade and investment, helping our companies to expand their operations and to prosper here for the good of both countries.

"But as you know, two weeks before I arrived, we had the Sept 11, 2001 incident and that changed everything. It changed my priorities and the priorities of my Government as well.

"And so, by the time I arrived here, priority number one, two or three were enlisting Malaysia's co-operation on counter-terrorism and that remains the absolute top priority," Huhtala told the New Sunday Times in an interview at her well-known embassy in Jalan Tun Razak.

And on that score, she feels that Malaysia has continued to be a good partner with close co-operation and "that has not changed at all, that has not faltered".

A word on the US embassy will not be amiss at this point.

It is not easily forgotten for several reasons: it is probably the best-guarded foreign mission around - the building is imposing and parking facilities are almost non-existent for guests.

It has also been accorded the most attention by police in recent years in the wake of threats by the al-Qaeda movement to take its campaign against the US away from the American homeland.

Security, at the embassy and involving Americans, has been at the forefront of Huhtala's brief in Malaysia.

She has had the burden of explaining US policy on terrorism and numerous other policies that have rubbed the Islamic world and Malaysia the wrong way.

For instance, the US invasion of Iraq saw intense opposition from the Islamic world and others, with the spotlight on Malaysia and former Prime

Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The fallout from the US act of war and subsequent actions have yet to blow over.

The release of the US Government's fifth annual international religious freedom report was another, causing a flap in Malaysia which was described as a nation in which some religious freedoms were curtailed.

Huhtala was summoned by Wisma Putra soon after returning from Christmas holidays for an explanation on the report.

The veteran diplomat in her 50s takes this in her stride as she probably has other instances where Washington's policies have ruffled feathers in Kuala Lumpur.

She takes pains to explain the rationale behind the report which upset Malaysian leaders, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and the people.

She argues that Malaysia had not been picked out for criticism but that it was a normal report mandated by Congress.

This is typical American foreign policy, not unlike that of Singapore's, where explanations, and rarely if not ever apologies, are offered.

For all the fire and brimstone of late from US leaders following the escalation of its war against terrorism, the person delivering their message to the Malaysian Government is surprisingly soft-spoken.

Her voice notwithstanding, she has projected a visage that has made her Government's stand on all manner of issues known beyond doubt.

Insufferable as the US position on several issues may be to many Malaysians and others alike, she has conducted herself in the professional manner that has won her friends in Wisma Putra and other government departments.

Huhtala feels that Abdullah can help ease tension between the US and Malaysia which was at its height during the latter part of the tenure of Dr Mahathir for no fault of the latter.

Dr Mahathir, never one to stomach unfair remarks from any quarter without replying with a well-aimed broadside of his own, took former US Vice-President Al Gore to task for interfering in Malaysia's internal affairs.

As expected, some Americans did not take kindly to that.

Their stubborn refusal to adhere to standard international behaviour by infrequently commenting on the incarceration of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim earned them the wrath of many Malaysians.

But this is a page from poor US-Malaysia ties that Huhtala wants to put behind her.

Huhtala made this crystal clear in a speech at a East-West Center function in Honolulu in November last year when the first signals came from the US about a possible thaw in relations.

She had expressed hope for improved relations with Abdullah, wanting "the hot rhetoric to disappear" in favour of constructive action.

"I do think that (bilateral) ties are on the upswing right now ...I have always believed that Malaysia can play an important international role as such a well-developed country with a Muslim majority.

"I am optimistic and hopeful that relations will continue to improve. We have a very sound bilateral relationship. It has always been so. We can move towards greater co-operation on economic and political matters. I am hopeful that we can go down that road together," she said.

Huhtala and her officers have held discussions with Malaysian officials over the past three months on the renewal of ties which she hopes may be manifested in future, among others, in the exchange of official visitors.

On trade relations, the immediate issue on her plate is the Malaysian

ban on US beef products after the mad cow disease scare in America.

"We are very concerned about maintaining safe and wholesome food. We have taken extensive action ourselves to limit the damage from the diseased animal."

After all, the US is Malaysia's largest trading partner while Malaysia is the 11th largest trading partner of the only superpower around with latest bilateral trade figures amounting to RM129.2 billion.

The envoy agrees that this is an indication that bilateral trade ties have largely remained intact despite the occasional hiccup.

"There is a tendency for trade to continue despite political difficulties. It is growing all the time. It is also very much in Malaysia's favour."

American investment in Malaysia is substantial, she said, with indications of it in-creasing this year with the possible signing soon of a trade and investment framework.

"It sets up a formal mechanism for regular high-level discussions between our countries on trade issues and it will have a work plan that will help expand trade broadly in both directions."

Huhtala, who has travelled to almost all the States with her husband, Eino, who has been in Malaysia with her since day one, finds Malaysians "wonderful".

What does she do to relax?

"I cook on Sundays. I usually do either Thai, French, Italian and, yes, Malaysian cuisine, too."

As Huhtala enters her third, and possibly last, year here, she can take comfort in the fact that the winds of change have arrived, heralding better times for bilateral ties.