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A pragmatist looking to right past wrongs

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SHAFIE U. Ahmad, the Bangladesh High Commissioner to Malaysia-designate, is a pragmatist who will do what it takes to get the job done.

Even if this means ruffling feathers within the 150,000-strong Bangladeshi community in the country who, he sadly acknowledges, make "it a difficult assignment here for Bangladeshi diplomats".

He should know. He had to take over on short notice recently as his predecessor, Mohammed Masood Aziz, had to leave for home after certain issues involving the community here were aired by the Bangladesh media.

Minutes into the interview at the High Commission along Jalan Ampang, it becomes clear that Shafie is undeterred by the challenges ahead.

The 52-year-old former head of administration at the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry appears perfect for the job of putting right the relationship between the High Commission and some Bangladeshis in Malaysia.

"I have come here with an open mind. I am also mindful of the challenges ahead of me. I think I can handle this," says the soft-spoken diplomat entrusted until recently with the task of untangling the myriad administrative knots in the foreign service.

Shafie is aware that all eyes at home, at least in the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry, are on him. He has been hand-picked to right the wrongs of the past and much is expected of him.

"Malaysia is a prized posting for us. It is a first-grade mission. We respect Malaysia for its achievements which have impressed the international community," he says. There are several urgent problems looming on the horizon for the career diplomat who has 30 years of experience in the field.

For one, the issuance of work permits and visa applications to tens of thousands on an annual basis comes with its own unique problems which invariably leave some unhappy.

There is also the added responsibility of looking after the welfare of the second largest expatriate community in Malaysia, with problems relating to their security, jobs and interaction with locals.

"By and large, most Bangladeshis here understand the role of the High Commission. There are, however, a few who differ on how things should be done."

It is apparent that Shafie does not want High Commission staff or the Bangladeshi community to dwell on the past.

The slightly reserved father of two teenage sons has set an impressive agenda for himself and the Bangladeshi community here. And he looks like the man who can achieve it.

Shafie hopes to use his considerable experience, which has seen him in tighter spots, like in Sri Lanka during the heady days of the mid-1980s when the war between the Sri Lankan Government and the Tamil Tigers was at its height, to see him through here.

The first item on his list is to enhance the relationship with Bangladeshis here.

"I have no strategy as far as this is concerned. I want my people here to live in peace. We are rich in traditions and I want them to remember and practise them here. They should support the mission here and vice versa," says the first-time head of mission.

The second, and which he hopes will eventually take most of his energy and effort, is to push Bangladesh-Malaysia ties to new heights, especially

on the economic front.

"There is so much to be done. The opportunities are limitless. There is so much of synergy between our countries. The problem is the lack of knowledge among Malaysians of Bangladesh," he says of this ironic situation given the huge Bangladeshi community here.

The problem may lie in the fact that the Malaysian perspective of Bangladesh's potential does not extend beyond low-income workers.

They are unaware that there is a 30 million strong middle-class in Bangladesh, larger than the entire Malaysian population, eager and willing to spend on imported luxury items.

This is despite several trips to Bangladesh in the 1990s by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who tried unsuccessfully for nearly a decade to engage Malaysian businessmen to identify investment opportunities in Bangladesh.

Shafie says bilateral trade statistics speak for themselves.

Bangladesh labour is cheaper than in most countries, it has an excellent investment climate and a trainable workforce that has a working knowledge of English.

"Take our ready-made garments. Why not buy them cheaper from us rather than from other countries? After all, we export high quality ready-made wear to Europe and other parts of the world."

Little needs to be said of the high-quality Bangladeshi leather, pharmaceuticals, engineering equipment, marine products or "the potatoes grown in our country which are so cheap that one can make huge profits on them".

The envoy is, however, aware of the need for Bangladeshis to clean up their act to make their nation more attractive to investors and tourists.

"I realise that the problem also lies with visitors seeing the lack of infrastructure, people on the streets, the messy appearance of our cities. We are doing something about these things, but it will take time."

Shafie's concern over the lack of bilateral trade ties is understandable when there are so many economic commonalities between the two nations to be tapped for mutual benefits.

The balance of trade has always been unimpressive, with Bangladesh currently exporting RM8 million to Malaysia and importing RM150 million.

He is, of course, cognizant of the fact that businessmen wanting to invest in other countries will always look for appropriate banking links with their own countries.

These facilities will also be particularly helpful to the expatriate Bangladeshi community in Malaysia to repatriate funds home.

This is why he is personally involved in negotiations with Bangladeshi exchange houses to set up branches in Malaysia in the near term.

Shafie has a secret weapon he hopes to use in enhancing economic ties between the two countries - Farooq Sobhan, a former Bangladeshi High Commissioner to Malaysia.

The colourful personality whose name was a common feature in the society columns of local newspapers in the 1980s has become a lobbyist of sorts for Bangladeshi businessmen eager to do business with Kuala Lumpur.

Sobhan, who went on to become the secretary-general of the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry, was in Kuala Lumpur recently to bring together Bangladeshi and Malaysian businessmen.

"He is helping to identify business opportunities in Malaysia that can be exploited by Bangladeshi businessmen. He makes trips when he can to help us in our efforts to take bilateral economic ties to a new dimension."

Another issue close to Shafie's heart is that of Malaysians futhering their education in Bangladesh.

He is wistful when recollecting the times when Malaysians used to graduate mostly in medicine or dentistry from universities in Bangladesh with several rising to senior positions in government service or private practice.

"I have not seen Malaysians going to Bangladesh recently to study. We need a relook at this," he says, recounting the 1970s and 1980s when the University of Dacca was a popular place for Malaysian students on a small budget.

With his heavy agenda in Kuala Lumpur, does he have time to relax?

Shafie, an occasional golfer, likes to spend quiet nights with his wife, Sehelley, listening to Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore's songs or reading biographies.