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A role in ensuring justice in world

Ramlan Said

FOR Malaysia, the Non-Aligned Summit in Kuala Lumpur signifies a feather in its cap, given the role it has played in the movement over the years.

For Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar, the Prime Minister's special envoy, who has been involved in NAM summits since 1972, the event is all the more meaningful considering NAM is an event close to his heart.

The 66-year-old diplomat reminisced about the old days when delegates and officials attending the summit were still in the process of "modernising themselves". He gave a tongue-in-cheek, at times humorous, account, of his experiences at past summits when "things were not as smooth".

"I was at the Algiers Summit where meetings were set at 10am but never started until evening. One day (former Prime Minister) Tun Abdul Razak saw me at his villa at 8am and remarked 'Oh, you are very early', to which I replied 'No, I just came back from a meeting'. He then ordered me to sleep and even offered me his villa."

At another summit, Kamil recalled arriving late at an airport before proceeding to his hotel. As there was no one around at the hotel, he did what he thought was the most logical thing at that time: break into his room and going to sleep.

He is confident, however, that delegates at Kuala Lumpur will not have to go through these inconveniences. In terms of logistics and preparations, he says not many problems are expected this time around, an assurance bolstered by the fact that Malaysia had passed with flying colours in hosting events like the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and G15.

"I am confident we will be an excellent host and an effective chairman until the next summit."

Kamil, who ended his service with the Government as the Foreign Ministry secretary-general, says the recognition given to Malaysia by the international world is not something that came overnight, and he stresses that leadership plays a crucial role.

"Yes, we became very active because of the Prime Minister. People will listen to you if your country is stable, prosperous and there is no trouble in your own backyard.

"We are one country that has done well, moving up the economic ladder from an agro-based economy to an industrial one. This did not happen overnight and you need a leader with a vision and the ability to realise the vision."

He says Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's leadership and vision will be one difficult feat to be matched by other leaders.

"He is not only a man with a vision but a man who makes sure the vision is realised. For example, just look at Putrajaya today ... it is a reality. This is an icon, a monument perhaps to his vision."

Stressing that his words were his views and not representative of the Government, he says his goal is to impart his perceptions of the grouping, then and now.

"We came into NAM after some difficulties. I was involved in the NAM bureau from 1972 to 1975 when I was serving as Malaysia's deputy permanent representative at the United Nations in New York. It was a difficult period at that time, the Vietnam War was going on; there were problems related to the setting up of the Government in Cambodia by the United

States, which we had to somehow defend; it was a period of heightened Cold War; East and West, there were a lot of issues we had to deal with.

"One of the difficult issues we had to deal with was the war in Vietnam; the legitimacy of the Lon Nol Government; the question of Chile where President (Salvador) Allende was ousted by a coup, and which today has been accepted as an American-instigated coup where General Augusto Pinochet was installed. These issues had somehow almost split the movement."

On Cambodia, he says Malaysia took a strong position because it is a neighbour: at one Foreign Ministers' meeting, Malaysia walked out with Laos and Myanmar because of a split within the ranks of NAM, particularly within the bureau.

"Looking at it on hindsight, it was not a very good move to walk out of the meeting as we wanted to continue playing a moderate role. The reason why we took the position was because we felt the problems of Cambodia was a problem of Southeast Asia, therefore, we should be able to provide input regarding which way NAM should take. But that is history now."

According to Kamil, another problem he faced in his capacity as a member of the NAM bureau was the question of the zone of peace, freedom and neutrality or ZOPFAN.

"After a meeting in Brunei, Tun Abdul Razak was inspired by the idea of neutrality and he came back with the idea to set up the zone in this region. We had a very tough time getting NAM to endorse that.

"At the summit in Algiers, we failed to get the endorsement because the question being asked was, "If it was a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality, why was an Asian country being used as a launchpad for the American bombardment of Vietnam?"

He outlined many other challenges, one of which was how NAM played a role in the unfolding political situation in the West.

"There were countries in NAM regarded as pro-East but there were also countries more sympathetic to the West, so much so that the position of NAM at that time was questioned by some countries."

NAM, however, continued to actively play its role, putting emphasis not only on political issues confronting the world, but also on economic issues, with an overall focus on what member nations can do for themselves as a group of developing countries. This, he says, is a role the movement continues to play to this day.

How does he view unity among NAM members now compared with the movement's difficult years in the 1960s and 1970s?

Circumstances have changed, he says, as during the Cold War, there were NAM members sympathetic to the West or East bloc.

"Most political issues then were related to conflict between the West and East, but we do not have that today. Of course they are people who owed a lot to the superpowers but I think even such countries look at things in a different way now."

Is NAM strong enough to stop America's hegemony? He says members have to reach a consensus first on the kind of role they should and could play, then work with others outside the movement sharing similar perceptions.

"It is a challenge more because NAM is large with 114 members. We are spread out throughout the world, we have our own emphasis and priorities within our own region. But on big issues, especially where it touches on the principle of fairness and justice, I don't think anyone can depart from the common perception. We all believe in peace and security and want to contribute something to it. I think there is a role here for NAM to focus and I think we can do something."

He says it is expected of powerful nations to dismiss other people's views because that was how they are expected to act.

"So, it is up to us. We should regard their tendency to reject views not compatible to theirs as a challenge, to face it in a way that would bring some kind of recognition."

The Vietnam War, he says, was lost in the streets of the US when Americans demonstrated. "Perhaps, the same thing can happen again. There are reports of many demonstrations in the US and other countries.

"I think people who believe in not going to war in Iraq will continue to voice their objections. I subscribe to views that if there is going to be a war, it will have serious repercussions.

"We have to look at the ramifications of going to war, what will happen to the Middle East and elsewhere and how to get rid of terrorism when the anger is so deep and great. These are things that NAM should look at and I think they will.

"Again, chances are the US will not give much consideration to us but this does not mean NAM should not do anything and just watch from the sidelines."

For this summit, he says he hopes the leaders will give more weight to solving the Middle East crisis. "How much longer can they (Palestinians) endure the hardship?"

He says that after the Cold War, questions were raised as to whether NAM was relevant.

He says that it is, more so now after the events of Sept 11, 2001.

"I think it should play an active role in seeing there is justice in the world. I am more concerned with what is happening, the way things are developing where before we had two poles, but now there is only one superpower.

"What do we see in this superpower? Is there going to be a Pax America? What do we do in that instance? To me, NAM should see to it that Pax America is not established and not become a new order."

Touching on Dr Mahathir's role, he says it was crucial. The Prime Minister has been recognised as one statesman who can lead NAM forward, he says.

"I don't think this being his last few months in office can affect the leadership of NAM in Malaysia. I expect the principles and direction of NAM to be set in Kuala Lumpur. I am happy that NAM will be held here under his leadership."