

16/08/2003

An open, welcoming letter to Megawati

John Teo

DEAR President Megawati,

A very warm welcome to Kuching, the principal Malaysian gateway that boasts a formal land border crossing into your vast and great country.

We regret that you and your delegation may catch a whiff of and sight of a slight haze in the city as you land. It is something we have to put up with this time every year for the past few years, but perhaps because someone in the bad habit of starting a large-scale open burning knows you will be visiting us this time, it has not been particularly bad so far this year.

We hope you appreciate the pains we take in turning our city into a garden city and a also "healthy" city. We are heartened by the many kind comments your compatriots from across the border have made about their visits here. They are deeply embarrassed that "our" annual haze largely originates from your side of the border, but are as helpless as we are to do anything about it. Perhaps you can be of some help to us?

We in Sarawak are, by and large, grateful for the substantial benefits our proximity to Indonesia provides us. We are largely kith and kin and will not let national borders bother us too much. Indonesian traders used to do a roaring trade with Malaysians right at the border check-point at Entikong. But once governmental authorities saw it fit to make it more "organised" by housing them in proper premises a bit up from the check-point, the trade just fizzled out.

An officer from your Co-ordinating Ministry of the Economy recently came all the way from Jakarta for a day-long observation of daily goings-on at the border check-point. He marvelled at how, except for the passport checks, cross-border trade flourished.

Our traders are truly pioneers of Afta, the Asean Free Trade Area that your Government and ours are actively promoting. This is as it should be. Free trade and free markets are such wonderfully efficient allocators of economic resources within and without our borders. Tinker with such freedom and we may all end up the poorer - literally!

We know about Indonesia's aspirations and cannot be anything but sympathetic. Government officials and ordinary Indonesians from West Kalimantan come calling on us and pronounce their determination to turn their province into one akin to Sarawak, and Pontianak into a city akin to Kuching. Help us, we keep hearing.

Our airplanes from Pontianak are full practically every day. Our hotels and private hospitals enjoy the steady presence of Indonesian patrons. Our colleges eagerly snap up Indonesian students. If only more ordinary Indonesians were like such valued customers of ours. It can only be good for everybody. We are therefore not unaware that helping Indonesia means we will be helping ourselves as well.

But mostly, what we hear of are plans, Indonesian plans. Such plans, if realised, will benefit Indonesians - yes. But if Malaysians are to be persuaded about such plans, they need to hear something also about how such plans will benefit them, too. Better yet, show them concrete examples of Malaysians successfully taking up such plans and benefiting themselves and Indonesians in the process.

Madame President, we hope your short visit to our city will be a good respite from the many intractable problems you face back home. On top of the agenda in your discussions with our Prime Minister must be the

security challenges both our countries face.

Yet security challenges basically have their roots in economic challenges. Attend to our ordinary citizens' basic economic needs and our security challenges will surely be abated and, in time, solved.

Your particular challenge is having to attend simultaneously to both economic and security challenges so that they do not feed on each other and land you with a wholly untenable vicious cycle. In seeking to take on this challenge, I am sure you can count on the admiration, good-will and support of all Malaysians.

* Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri meets Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for annual bilateral consultations in Kuching next week.