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Razali stands out as UN mediator and a gentleman

THE achievement of one of the country's foremost diplomats, Tan Sri Razali Ismail, should go down well in the history books of diplomacy.

Described as a shrewd and sharp negotiator, he made Malaysia very proud when the talks he brokered between the Myanmar ruling junta and the National League of Democracy led to the release of Nobel laureate and leader of the NLD, Aung Syu Kyi, from a 19-month house arrest last year.

He had, six years earlier, become the talk of the town when he was appointed chairman of the 51st United Nations General Assembly in 1996 and many of us felt a sense of pride seeing a fellow countryman presiding the assembly in his purple baju Melayu.

Razali, 64, is currently the UN Secretary-General's special envoy to Myanmar, a post he has held since 1998, and is also the special adviser to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

As special envoy to Myanmar, Razali's task is not an easy one. His mission is to shift Myanmar's military rulers towards democracy, a rather tough job to achieve following the the detention of Syu Kyi three months ago.

So far, Razali has been the only foreigner allowed to see Syu Kyi and has been in the forefront of negotiations for her release.

Even after the earlier release of Syu Kyi from house arrest, Razali had expressed his disappointment over the direction of his talks with the junta and once said that he considered quitting his post.

But he persevered and later said he would soldier on.

That is Razali, a determined man, remembered by UN delegates as a hard-hitting and outspoken diplomat.

As special envoy to Myanmar, he has been criticised by some Western media over his business interests in Myanmar, an allegation he had said should not have arisen.

And if there was a conflict of interest, the UN, he had noted, could always terminate his contract.

Born in 1939 in Alor Star, he grew up in what he referred to as a "half-town, half-village", and despite having spent close to a decade in the city of all cities, New York, he was not a city person.

This kampung boy joined the diplomatic service in 1963 and was posted to several countries worldwide.

Among his posts were Malaysian Ambassador to Poland in 1978 and High Commissioner to India in 1982.

He rose through the ranks and was made Malaysia's permanent representative to the UN before his appointment as president of the UN General Assembly where he played a key role in the organisation of the first UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

During his one-year tenure as president of the UN General Assembly, he was credited for instilling a new work culture in the assembly by insisting on efficiency and punctuality among delegates which resulted in a year's savings of US\$2 million (RM7.6 million).

He did not mince words when he slammed the United States for its failure to live up to its financial commitments, owing the UN about US\$1.4 billion but offering only to repay US\$800 million.

"There's no reason why a special arrangement should be made for the most powerful country in the world," was his bold statement at the final Press conference at the end of his term.

During the same event, he also spoke of the contentious debate on reform of the Security Council and said the five permanent members of the Security Council had "absolutely abused their veto power."

Razali was also made the Malaysian delegate to the UN Security Council in 1999.

For his contributions to the development and promotion of international law and policy, he became one of the first recipients of the Elizabeth Haub Prize in Environmental Diplomacy at New York's Pace University Law School.

In November 2000, Razali was accorded the French National Order of Merit by the French Embassy in Kuala Lumpur.

Judging from recent developments, his mission to bring about democratisation and national reconciliation to Myanmar may seem an uphill task but observers agreed that his appointment was astute, considering his distinguished career as a diplomat.

Even the US deputy secretary of state Richard L. Armitage paid tribute to Razali's tireless efforts and said the US would continue to support his future attempts to foster dialogue.

In an interview with a local financial weekly two years ago, asked how he would want to be remembered, Razali said "as a bundle of contradictions", and for as long as he had not enough, "I will do more and more."

Razali's challenge now is to bring positive changes in Myanmar and there is no doubt he would use the best of his diplomatic skills to achieve this.

And as long as this goal is not achieved, he will indeed do more and more, and make Malaysia proud of him once more.