

01/01/2003

2002 could not have been a better year

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HOW fast a year passed us by, I thought as I took in the magnificent view

of the sun setting on the Andaman Sea from the balcony of the serene Langkawi Lagoon Resort during the last days of 2002.

It could not have been a better year. The economy maintained its strength and in fact the country has lined up yet another seemingly workable strategy to ensure we will not be putting all our eggs into one basket by depending too much on foreign investments.

That we are strengthening our domestic capacity also assured me that should war actually break out in Iraq, this nation would withstand impact

the war will have on global economy.

The banks, we heard, are mapping yet another round of mergers to even make themselves stronger. I have always kept a close watch on banks simply

because they are a primary indicator of the economy's health.

They are performing as well as expected and what a chief executive of a

foreign bank told me before the year ended has given me hope that even if

the banking industry is liberalised, a strong Malaysian bank would continue to have an edge over any foreign competitor.

No matter how globalised the banking industry gets, banking remains essentially a localised business, he said.

Palm oil meanwhile has been enjoying times much better than before last

year. The market watchers say the commodity will continue to support Malaysia's economic foundation as there will not be the lack of buyers.

They asked me only to imagine the potential markets in China, India and

eastern Europe to form an opinion on outlook for the commodity.

Our schools are going back to teaching Mathematics and Science subjects

in English this year. We should support that, for a more guaranteed future

in the fast-moving world.

But while doing that, the Government, the Ministry of Education in particular, must look at ensuring uniformity in rules applicable to all schools in the country.

I was shocked some months back on knowing that a friend's daughter was denied a chance of becoming a school librarian, until she covers her head

with the 'tudung'. The student wanted so badly to become one since she was

told that it would help her profile a lot should she later apply for a place in a fully-boarding school.

I don't know whether schools on their own are permitted to come up with

their special rules, but I do know that in as far as the Ministry of Education is concerned, the rule says a blouse and a pinafore would be good enough for a female primary school student and the 'tudung' is an option.

I know this can become a touchy subject for many, but we must face it once and for all so that everyone is clear about our national education system.

It is one of the ways, I think, to ensure that all schools in the country have a good mix of pupils from all the races. Perhaps no one has been bold enough to say this before, but I think the non-Malay parents have been discouraged to send their children to schools where a majority of the students are Malays and wear the 'tudung'.

If we want to get back to the days when good racial relations were evident even in schools, we must seriously look into this matter.

Politically, Malaysia is as stable as it can be. While we are entering the final year under the stewardship of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, he has more than assured us that the succession will be a smooth one.

He still however has two huge responsibilities this year, one having to host the Non-Aligned Meeting summit and the other to host the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) meeting later.

I have received e-mails from friends overseas, especially those from other Islamic developing countries, saying they will miss his presence as a leader when he retires. These were the same people whom while I was on my tour-of-duty in America, said they saw only Dr Mahathir as one who could unite the Muslim world.

But I was also told that the Americans too would be watching closely Dr Mahathir's handling of the OIC summit.

When I was in Mexico recently for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting, someone whispered that US Secretary of State Colin Powell had jokingly (or was he?) told his Malaysian counterpart Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar that should Malaysia take too strong a stand against the West through the OIC summit, he would give the Foreign Minister "a call".

Personally though, I think that since we have not taken orders from anyone before, we should not take any now.

Ah, must I mention the stockmarket? Nothing much can be said about the performance of stocks that has not been said by others. But I would only say now to those having to hold stocks of those suspended companies under the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange's Practice Note 4 rules that my heart are with you fellows. Take what happened as just one of the many hazards in investing.

All else considered, as I also took in the breathtaking view of Pulau Langkawi from atop gunung Mat Cincang which is now reachable by an exhilarating cable car ride, I remain convinced that a great future awaits

us in this equally great nation of ours.

If you are not yet feeling as positive as I am, go on, take the cable car ride up the mountain and be convinced yourself. Have a great year.