

09/03/2003

Faux pas by UCLA professor

Balan Moses

A COLUMNIST with The Straits Times of Singapore is guilty of breaching the most basic of journalistic tenets - checking the facts before writing.

Tom Plate, also University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) professor, committed the faux pas when he alleged that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had "shouted at the top of his lungs" (sic) when addressing the 13th Non-Aligned Movement Summit.

This would be evident to all who attended the meeting as the Prime Minister had no need to shout as the public address system at the Putra World Trade Centre is said to be a state-of-the-art facility.

Besides, those who have heard Dr Mahathir speak would attest to the fact that the cogency of his argument would negate the need to shout.

Plate's ST column on March 1 began with the opening premise that Dr Mahathir's style allegedly differed from that of US Secretary of State Colin Powell in that "if Mr Powell's style is cool, Dr Mahathir's is anything but".

In the classic style of armchair critics from the North, he castigated Dr Mahathir for allegedly tearing into the West and "pandering to the exasperation of the delegates from the 114 developing nations".

"Mr Colin Powell, who is widely liked almost everywhere, especially in Asia..." ran the first few lines of Plate's piece which came just as tensions between Singapore and Malaysia seemed to be easing.

Plate juxtaposed this with his assessment of Dr Mahathir, which went: "By contrast, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is not so widely liked everywhere...."

The ST columnist's misplaced advice to Dr Mahathir in concluding his piece was that the West would be more amenable to hearing the Prime Minister out "if Dr Mahathir understood that Westerners are not so hard of hearing".

On another front, the ST yesterday ran a story headlined "Top students for Singapore: KL educationists worried", which claimed that Malaysian educationists were concerned over the issue of top students being tapped to study in Singapore universities.

The article with the sub-heading "Non-bumi students, however, welcome the opportunity, citing the difficulty in gaining entry to universities in Malaysia", claimed that those most concerned by the alleged phenomenon were educationists in the Malaysian Chinese community.

Writer Leslie Lau went on to quote Dong Jiao Zong leader Quek Suan Hiang as saying that 500 to 600 top Malaysian Chinese students were crossing the Causeway every year for university education.

Meanwhile, the ST reproduced parts of a speech by former Singapore High Commissioner to Malaysia K. Kesavapany yesterday where he spoke about "a deep sense of anguish about the state of bilateral ties", which he detected when attending the NAM meeting.

In the article headlined "How the Lion and Tiger can co-exist peacefully", the ex-envoy felt that the turbulent phase in bilateral ties will pass and a sense of rationality will prevail.

The speech at the National University of Singapore Political Science Alumni forum last week looked at the state of diplomatic relations between both nations besides suggesting ways to mitigate the situation.

Kesavapany also took the Press on both sides of the Causeway to task for the alleged sin of sensationalising news to sell newspapers.

While saying that the Press should refrain from publishing news selectively, he also urged the Press to be "more circumspect in its reporting to help enhance the `feel good' factor".