

01/03/2003

## Foreign journalists get insight into NST

Deborah Loh

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - A group of foreign journalists were today given an insight into the operations and policies of the New Straits Times as well as Government-media relations in the country.

Eighteen of them visited the NST headquarters at Balai Berita in Bangsar as part of the International Visitors' Programme for the recently-concluded 13th Non-Aligned Movement Summit.

Yesterday, they had a meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

They were welcomed by New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd Group-Editor-In-Chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, NST Assistant Group Editor Hardev Kaur, Assistant Editor (news) Syed Nadzri Syed Harun and Assistant Editor (production) Salehuddin Othman.

Senior editors and writers of the NSTP's publications were also present.

The journalists were from Australia, Austria, Bahrain, China, Egypt, Namibia, Oman, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Italy, Jordan, New Zealand, United Arab Emirates and Zimbabwe.

Abdullah, in a short speech, briefly outlined the NST's history and its editorial position.

"The NST is an establishment newspaper as are all the other licensed dailies in this country. As is The Times of London, The Telegraph and The New York Times.

"It is liberal but patriotic, free but with a deep sense of accountability for this potentially fractious nation's stability and wellbeing," he said.

Abdullah explained the sensitivities of being a multi-racial and multi-religious country, and the resulting constraints on news reporting.

"We often feel irritated at the bit, but at the end of the day, the argument for restraint is compelling. Our values make us easy targets for criticism, both here and abroad, for which I offer no apologies."

He also stressed the NST's ability to be impartial by reporting news on dissenting views by the public or opposition parties.

"Of course, it is more elegant to pontificate than it is to sweat. Here at the NST, we have been doing a bit of both as we record and sometimes, help make the history of Malaya and Malaysia during the past 157 years."

During the question-and-answer session later, Abdullah said the Malaysian media were competitive and could be critical in their reporting to remain relevant.

"Look at Singapore, which has only one publishing house. Here we have many, so we have to be competitive. We support the Government but that doesn't mean we don't carry reports on the Opposition. Neither does the Prime Minister's picture appear on the front page all the time."

"In some parts of the world, the picture of the ruler or head of state appears on the masthead or front-page everyday of the year."

One visiting journalist commented that what Abdullah stated was true, especially in the Middle East.

He said the NST had been critical on several issues, such as the policy on English in schools (now being partially corrected with the teaching of science and mathematics in English), corruption by officials, politicians and even in the corporate sector and the disproportionate racial make-up of the armed forces, the police, civil service and the private sector.

"Throughout, the NST has moved with the times, much quicker if I may say

so, than the other newspapers of comparable longevity."

Abdullah said there had been some hits and some misses, of course, but the NST's pre-eminent stature remained in spite of an increasingly competitive environment.

"On good days, the figures have surpassed 160,000 copies for week-days and 180,000 for Sundays. Total publication daily (of four newspapers) is more than 600,000 copies and the NST now averages 142,000 daily," Abdullah said, adding that the NST had more than 400 editorial staff as well as numerous contributors, free-lancers and stringers.

Since last year, the NSTP has returned to profitability.

Abdullah also explained Malaysian Press laws, under which newspapers had to renew their publishing licences with the Home Ministry every year.