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Highlighting the unknown in Iraq

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AT a corner of Palestine Hotel in Central Baghdad, an Iraqi man had set up a make-shift stall selling soft drinks.

A Malaysian journalist, dying for a chilled can of Coke, was quizzed on his nationality by the Iraqi.

"Malayzie, very good ... US\$1 (RM3.80) for the Coke," said the Iraqi.

The Malaysian protested that the price was too steep but the Iraqi said that was the standard selling price.

Next, an American soldier stationed near the hotel's checkpoint, asked to buy a can.

"US\$2," said the Iraqi. The American protested but the Iraqi said: "Take it or leave it."

The American took it. The Iraqi then turned towards the Malaysian journalist and said: "American bad."

The drama may not warrant a mention amid the tragedy afflicting Iraq but it tells numerous tales.

On one side, Iraqi opinion makers, from tribal chiefs to sectarian religious mullahs, are coming in droves to the US civil military administrative centre to engage in political bargaining, seeking help to restore power and water supply as well as law and order.

On the other, Sunni and Shia mullahs, expressed sentiments similar to that of the Iraqi trader about the American troops.

It must be baffling to those who saw the American media beaming footages of Iraqis in jubilation with the sacking of Baghdad and children offering flowers to American soldiers.

But unknown or not highlighted to the outside world were the many Iraqis who broke down on seeing American soldiers at every nook and corner of their country, because now they have to answer to the foreigners when moving about in their own land.

If Malaysians were to reflect back to their own political crisis of 1998, the divide in the nation would have resulted in a somewhat similar situation.

At that time, the hatred for the Barisan Nasional Government and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was very intense among one segment of society moving under the reformasi banner.

Lest Malaysians forget, there were many among the reformasi supporters who were carrying American flags and banners, urging then US President Bill Clinton and Vice-President Al Gore to save them from the BN and Dr Mahathir.

If the crisis had not been contained and a civil war had erupted and American troops had moved in, those who had been involved in the demonstrations could be expected to be jubilant and would have welcomed the US forces with open arms.

After all, they had openly urged the US leadership then to help save them from the BN Government and Dr Mahathir.

The lucky thing, if it can be said so, is that Malaysia, in so far as Washington is concerned, is not such a strategic nation for its interest in Southeast Asia - at least not yet.

Otherwise, if the US had insisted on interfering with the domestic affairs of Malaysia, it would have justified its actions in the guise of liberating the people.

And its move would have been further justified if the American media had

shown the footage of the reformasi demonstrators carrying banners of "US Please Save Us".

The whole episode in Iraq is a good example of a nation caught in a quandary and political divide.

There are the Iraqis who had suffered under Saddam Hussein and who wanted to see him dead and are prepared to work with just about anyone, the Americans included, to achieve that end.

Then there is the group which loved and worshipped Saddam and did not want to see him nor his government removed.

The third group will be the ones who hated Saddam but are not prepared to work with just about anyone, especially the Americans, to see him and his government toppled.

For the first and second groups, the polarity of perceptions is clear and there is no ambiguity over their divide.

The third group will always be trapped in helplessness and will suffer from a sense of futility. In time to come, they will probably accept the US interference, try to make the best of things and continue to be a strong critic of Washington and its policies.

Generally, as observed after the sacking of Baghdad by the American troops, the second group is the one resisting the new order, some even pursuing armed resistance or at the least, continuing to find fault with the new American regime, apart from building strong hatred for the first group.

This group will always view the first group as traitors. If this second group ever wrests power, the first group will top their hit list.

But the weaker ones from the second group will eventually resign to the fact that Saddam is not going to return to liberate them from the US forces. In months, if not years to come, they will probably accept the loss of their nation's sovereignty as fait accompli.

The first group will go out of their way to show to the world their celebrations and will try to convince everyone that the American forces had truly liberated them. And even if it finally dawns upon them that their country had become an occupied territory, they will be in denial.

If the US troops decide to invade Syria, chances are this group will support Washington, if not be in the forefront to take up the mission, very much like their Arab brethren in Kuwait and Qatar.

By then, the misinformation about whether it is true or not that Syria is a threat to world peace and is harbouring terrorists or otherwise will be ignored.

But talking about misinformation, Malaysian journalists in Baghdad were informed that Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar had made a statement that they wanted to return to Malaysia.

He had also insinuated that they were in fear after what had happened to three of their colleagues.

What is scary here is that the Foreign Minister could be so misinformed over matters concerning citizens of his own country that one wonders if other information he dispensed about other nations and their people may be more misleading.

How Syed Hamid had come to such a conclusion is quite surprising as the journalists, including the three who were attacked, are preparing to travel to other parts of Iraq, including Mosul, which is currently seeing Iraqi resistance army engaged in battles with US troops.

As far as the the journalists are concerned, it is they who are being asked to return home and not the other way round.

At last, the likes of Syed Hamid who are the least qualified to talk about what is going on in Baghdad when no one from his ministry dared to step into Iraq had decided to jump on the publicity wagon to get a share

of the limelight.

No wonder, some of the efforts by Dr Mahathir to instil pride and confidence in Malaysians are negated by the likes of Syed Hamid who are only interested to see his name in print and not get to the real facts of the matter.

Syed Hamid may have come to his conclusion that the Malaysian journalists were in fear based on his assessment of some of his people from the ministry who feared for their safety if they entered Baghdad.

All this boils down to what kind of leadership the minister provides.

Whatever it is, it takes away the credibility of Syed Hamid to talk about what is going on in Iraq, let alone talk about those who are there.

Then again, the Malaysian journalists who are preparing to move out from Baghdad to Mosul, Tikrit, Najaf and Basra and to Syria where trouble is brewing, should not be distracted from performing their tasks for which they had volunteered.

After all, they are the only ones to provide as much information to the Malaysian tax-payers and media subscribers, which may include Syed Hamid, who has no other Malaysian source of input.

That is the reason why the matter relating to Syed Hamid is in the lower segment of this column; because the taxpayers paid for the upper segment of this article.

On that note, the likes of Syed Hamid should at best be humoured.