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Kudos all round for a truly well-organised NAM Summit

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WAY back in December, my colleagues and I sat down to plan our coverage of the 13th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement. We thought of the logistics, issues and manpower for such a major event. To some, this was going to be their first mega assignment and a new learning curve.

When the summit came, we were excited. This was one of the biggest, if not the biggest, summit or international event that Malaysia had ever hosted. We've hosted many international events before, such as Apec in 1998, Commonwealth Heads of Government summit (1989), G15 (1990), and a host of other functions of varying sizes and importance.

But the NAM summit was arguably the biggest in terms of the participating Heads of Government and state, and that automatically increases the level of importance and state of preparation.

The presence of several prominent and controversial personalities added spice to an already big gathering of world leaders.

A few big names such as Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi were absent but this did not reduce the excitement and importance of the summit. There was plenty to see, talk about, report and analyse. While the rhetoric took place within the august Dewan Merdeka in the Putra World Trade Centre, the adrenalin was also flowing at the International Media Centre there.

Having seen and used many media centres around the globe, I believe I can say with confidence that the IMC had served the interest of everyone with excellence. I could see that local and foreign journalists were treated without discrimination. There were desktop computers with Chinese and Arabic software, enough power points for the international journalists to plug in their laptops, and enough caffeine and food to make sure they could focus on the task at hand.

I'm glad the organisers had planned well ahead. Credit must be given to the Information and Foreign Ministries for paying attention to detail. I only wish that other local organisers provide similar support service to the media when they stage their conferences so that they can maximise the exposure their events deserve.

Staging the NAM summit gave us a lot of confidence in more ways than one. For a start, it showed the world our capability in terms of logistical and administrative services. The biggest credit could perhaps be given to our security arrangements. With the exception of one or two minor incidents, the summit was held without hitches, especially with the attention given to road safety and traffic flow.

One had to be near or at the Putra World Trade Centre to appreciate the ease with which we operated, and that included all the relevant support staff such as clerks, kitchen personnel, protocol chaps, and those manning their booths at the small but well-attended Tourism Corner.

For us scribes, it wouldn't have been possible to provide an extensive coverage if not for all of the above. To PWTC employees, it wouldn't have been possible to serve everyone's needs if not for the organiser's kind attention to detail.

If truth be made known, it wouldn't have been possible to do what we did if not for the simple fact that the new NAM chairman, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself came to personally inspect the venue several times before the meetings began. And he didn't mince words when he gave his "advice" and views.

One other aspect which not many people knew about was the presence of a high number of the foreign Press corps, many of whom came from their home countries. Some were based in nearby cities like Jakarta, Bangkok, Manila, and Hong Kong. The print media journalists were busy running about catching deadlines while the television crew were working round the clock sending their "feed", that is visual despatches sent through satellite channels.

Many, many years ago, it would have been almost impossible for Malaysia to get any international media attention, let alone positive or balanced reporting. Malaysia has been one of the most maligned countries despite and in spite of its political, economic and social successes. Some of its leaders have been at the brunt of foreign media scrutiny and depicted as tyrants and dictators. It's sad and has to be addressed.

There was an example of this when the Prime Minister held a late night Press conference after closing the summit on Tuesday night. A woman journalist from Australia asked if it was true that the foreign heads agreed to attend only after being promised brand-new Mercedes Benz as souvenirs!

Good Lord! What a preposterous idea! And how gullible can some people be!

A brand-new Merc as a gift? It's an insult to both the host country and the foreign guests, all of whom are more than capable of buying their own vehicle at home. There was a fair bit of applause when Dr Mahathir answered the journalist's question, though in the old days, he would have roasted the scribe for having the cheek to ask that kind of question. Another female journalist, from Croatia, had a different idea. She asked whether Dr Mahathir, having done a miracle for Malaysia, would be able to do the same for NAM. She asked if the Prime Minister could provide the same kind of leadership to NAM as he had done for Malaysia. There were chuckles from many of us when that question was asked as it showed recognition of the man and his country.

In October, we will be host again, this time to the summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). I recall a time when the Prime Minister attended an OIC summit in one of the Muslim countries in North Africa. The time slotted for the opening ceremony was moved several times because the summiteers did not keep to the time and one was still sleeping. Originally scheduled for the morning, the opening was eventually held well after lunch, enabling everyone present to be wide awake.

It won't happen here, mark my word. And after NAM, with the valuable lessons learnt, we ought to be ready to play host again. NAM's deliberations triggered a lot of interest among locals, including a budding penyajak. I'd like to share these few lines with you, with the hope that you will be equally inspired to stand up and be counted.

NAM, dunia kita jahanam
Sikap Bush benci Saddam
Kita berfoya semacam
Lupa derita nyawa terancam
Dunia gelap siang malam
Sikap dengki asyik geram
Takut perang sungguh seram
Nyawa hilang derita semacam