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Offer a genuine helping hand to friends in need

Ahmad A. Talib

`You belong to my heart, now and forever ...'

THAT was part of the lyrics of a song sung at the main function room of Timor Leste's biggest hotel in Dili two nights ago.

The occasion was the official dinner hosted by Mari Alkatiri, Prime Minister of Timor Leste, for his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, his wife Datuk Seri Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, and the accompanying Malaysian delegation.

It was the eve of Dr Mahathir's departure from Dili to Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. These countries were the last two visited by Dr Mahathir as Prime Minister.

Both have considerable Malaysian investments; both are developing economies, with the latter ahead in terms of infrastructure and sophistication; and both are friendly, too.

In Dili, Dr Mahathir was given a warm reception, a scene that was repeated when we landed in Port Moresby.

His assignments in Dili included a special address to the Parliament besides meeting the Malaysian community residing there. He was the first foreign head of government to visit Timor Leste since the country gained independence on May 20 last year.

Hence, the honour of speaking in the Timorese Parliament, where he shared his views on democracy and other contemporary issues. In the middle of his speech, the public address system decided to be unco-operative. When the electrician failed to fix the fault, Dr Mahathir moved away from the rostrum and continued his speech from the main table.

Wherever he went, he was followed by a horde of newsmen and photographers - obviously his reputation had preceded his visit. Representatives of the local and international media who operated from Dili enjoyed the Press conference at the end of his visit, a scene not uncommon elsewhere.

I asked around what was it that had prompted the Prime Minister to visit these two countries.

Dili is a victim of years of neglect. The 800,000 population is only now beginning to realise that they has missed out on development for far too long.

But in wanting to transform the country, the Government of Xanana Gusmao and Alkatiri must first of all initiate deep and extensive mindset changes. This is not going to be easy but the Timorese must fast-track their efforts if they wish to give meaning to their sovereignty.

It appears to me that the reconstruction of Timor Leste needs to be done almost from ground zero upwards.

The accepted currency is the US dollar. Unmetered taxis take you from place to place. Banana trees line the streets and Internet cafes are few and far between. Every 10 metres or so I could see people selling firewood and oil lamps helped street hawkers peddle their wares, mostly cigarettes and canned drinks.

If one is hasty, one may end up being judgmental about Timor Leste. But some enterprising Malaysians are making in-roads in the rebuilding of the country's economy with their involvement in general trading and the services sector.

Anyone with deep pockets and, more importantly, the willingness to take calculated risks in Timor Leste, may want to pursue infrastructure

projects such as road building and power station.

But they may hold back upon hearing stories that the people in that country have no work culture. For instance, if you want proper filing be done, you will have to teach them every step of the way.

It's only recently that the workers are getting acquainted with leave forms: in the past they just left their work stations without even notifying their bosses!

The people are friendly though. But I get the feeling that the population is waiting for instructions be given from the authorities on what to do next.

Having gained independence after a long and bloody struggle, they are asking: "What next, boss?" With the right planning and strategy, not to mention big financial support, Dili can be a playground for tourists in that part of the world.

In Port Moresby, Dr Mahathir was asked to give the Papua New Guinea Cabinet a "pep talk". This took place in the bilateral meeting (a common feature when the Prime Minister makes an official visit overseas) when PNG Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare, a known admirer, asked Dr Mahathir to give an impromptu lecture on managing a nation!

From that visit, Timor Leste ought to know by now that in Malaysia, it has a genuine friend. I feel that Malaysia meets the adage that "a friend in need is a friend indeed". A fledgling of a nation with a population of 800,000, the former Indonesian colony is making efforts to stand on its own feet as a sovereign nation, able and capable of bringing substantial meaning to its merdeka.

The message Dr Mahathir sent the people there was quite clear: Call us if you need help in developing your resources so that you can benefit from Malaysia's experiences. The Malaysian situation was no different - its agriculture-based economy was diversified successfully.

As for PNG, Somare had repeatedly asked Dr Mahathir to visit and see for himself the development that has taken place since his visits in the 1980s. PNG is a lot more advanced than Dili, as immediately evidenced from the big airport. The 19-gun salute and the size of the crowd that greeted Dr Mahathir testified to the man's popularity.

The locals who formed a long line to greet us appeared happy to be part of the welcoming ceremony. A man in a black, long-sleeved shirt approached the media in their mini bus with a handwritten note - Long Live Mahathir. It warmed our hearts.

But one must always be on guard in PNG. Any attempt to do a walkabout in the evening was dashed by officials, who repeatedly warned us against the idea without taking security precautions. There have been reports of assault, muggings and even killings in the street, which explained why even the main entrance to the hotel had a grill-iron gate. Apparently, iron grilles are part of the decor in this beautiful country.

Timor Leste is a country on a new learning curve and Papua New Guinea has a lot to learn in terms of nation building, as it has admitted. Perhaps, it is here that our country can help because it was not so long ago that we ourselves were learning how to administer our country.

As one well-known technocrat pointed out, these two countries have to put in place a proper and effective administrative and management structure before they can see substantial improvements in nation building efforts.

There are some 3,000 Malaysians in PNG involved in business. I met some of them in Port Moresby. They seemed to have adjusted well to the social and economic conditions in that country. Let us hope that they will carry the Malaysian flag high as they go about their work there. Good luck to them!

Selamat Berpuasa

MUSLIMS start fasting tomorrow, amid a global situation that sees the ummah divided. Ramadan ought to allow followers of the faith to pause a little and take a look at the predicament they're in. Muslims don't have much to cheer about, what with them being associated with acts of terror around the world. Nevertheless, selamat menyambut Ramadan!