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Ramp up our publicity against prejudice

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MALAYSIA has emerged from the 1997 financial crisis in much better shape than most countries. It is an Islamic country with a moderate, modern and progressive leadership. It is only one of two Islamic countries that has achieved a level of development that can be considered to be close to that of developed countries.

The Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) is one of the best airports and according to a British architect in London, there is none in Europe that compares with it. Malaysia has one of the best road and communication systems in the region, comparable to those of the developed world and in some cases even better than that of the First World.

Malaysia ended the year 2002 with a "strong finish". It is on track to register four per cent to five per cent growth following very credible 5.6 per cent GDP growth in the third quarter of last year.

What is even more significant is that in the face of a difficult and adverse world economic environment Malaysia's growth was broad-based.

But it has a perception gap, which combined with the "power of prejudice", results in Malaysia losing out, misunderstood and underestimated and underrated. The situation is made worse with the current focus on terrorism and Islam. The Bali bombings focused the world's attention on the region and actions of extremists could "subvert and destroy" its achievements and undermine the progress.

The subsequent travel advisories by the US, UK, Europe and Australia did not distinguish between one country and another in the region. It was a blanket advisory, that included Malaysia, which affected tourist arrivals to the region as a whole.

The increased suspicion of Malaysians, the delays in issuing visas to students and the checks and humiliation that some Malaysians face, including the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers, on arrival at some destinations is highly discriminatory and compound the power of prejudice.

As Datuk Paddy Bowie told an audience of British corporate leaders in London, Malaysia is "safer than most" and even compared with many developed countries, including those that issued the travel advisories.

Malaysia has been labelled "a terrorist hub with the usual exaggeration", Bowie added. Those attaching these labels fail to acknowledge and point out that Malaysia is the only country in the world that has fought the communist terrorists and won.

Kuala Lumpur had taken steps to deal with terrorists even before the Sept 11 attacks on the US and the current focus on terrorism and terrorists. But it was condemned for its measures then. The Government, nevertheless, as the London-based Economist points out, continues with its "rigorous implementation of security measures against potential terrorists". Now some of its laws for which it was loudly condemned are being emulated to varying degrees even by the US.

Malaysia is a Muslim country. But it is not in the mould of the Middle East. Malaysia is not the Arab world or Pakistan. It is a moderate, modern, tolerant and progressive country "with an enlightened leadership". It has been recognised as a "strategic ally" by Washington following Sept 11.

Malaysia's success is tangible. "Look at the landscape", Bowie told the business and finance leaders in the City of London. But it has a wide

perception gap and this needs to be addressed, dealt with and bridged as a matter of urgency.

Kuala Lumpur must step up its efforts to educate, inform and enlighten foreigners about the country and its policies. Malaysia and its leadership is unfortunately very badly misunderstood, especially abroad. Even the best of policies, if not explained, can lead to negative reaction and at times lead to disastrous results.

When UK's Secretary for International Development, Clare Short, said: "...we are a lot better than our image ...The Government is much better than the presentation" she could have been speaking for Malaysia.

While in Britain the public may be "sick to death of spin", the Malaysian Government's efforts and its policies could do with a lot of help and do a lot better with "spin". Its publicity machinery needs to be ramp up especially overseas where it is misunderstood, misrepresented and at times misinterpreted.

No one is going to do it for Malaysia. Thus, Kuala Lumpur must do so itself. But it has friends willing to help. There are "Friends of Malaysia" around the world, such as the British-Malaysia Friendship Society, which can and should be called upon to assist. The British will believe their countrymen more than they would Malaysians. Similarly, American businessmen with successful and profitable investments and businesses in Malaysia will be seen as "more credible".

They can help correct the image and put a positive spin on Malaysia. But Malaysians must take the lead, be more aggressive and take on the new role that is being thrust upon them. The negative perception of the country will not help their businesses and it is to their own advantage to correct it and help deal with the power of prejudice.

In the event of a US-led war against Iraq, which will be viewed as a war against Islam, Malaysia and Malaysians may be viewed with even greater suspicion. Foreign investors may reconsider their decisions, the tourism industry and its related businesses may take a greater hit and the risk premium may rise.

Malaysia has a role that is being thrust upon it by international events. Its leadership and chairmanship of the Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC) comes at a time when the Islamic world is viewed with great suspicion and distrust. Malaysia, with its moderate, tolerant and progressive brand of Islam, has the best credentials to help correct these views.

It needs to take advantage of the situation and help narrow, if not eliminate, the perception gap not only of itself but of the Islamic world. Kuala Lumpur has a role, and an important one in the current global environment, to project and show the world a "moderate, tolerant face of Islam".

With the Islamic world divided as it is, the task of correcting the perception will not be easy. But the perception gap must be bridged and the matter dealt with as objectively as possible. The current focus and attention on "Islamic terrorists and terrorism" has given rise to a lot of emotion and divisions within countries and between countries.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has not pulled any punches and spoken his mind even when his views are at odds with those of the most developed and powerful nation and leader in the world. Now he has a heavy responsibility as chairman of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) and OIC.

As observers point out, there could not be a better chairman of the OIC at this critical and crucial period. As the "moderate, progressive and tolerant" Islamic leader, Dr Mahathir has a heavy responsibility and others must help him to bridge that gap not only for Malaysia but also for the Islamic world.

