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Running a gauntlet of ice

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DURING his tenure as Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad often darted from one country to another, forging relations with leaders, establishing trade ties and gaining first-hand information about the nations he visited.

And he did not confine himself to the beaten track. One of the least expected of his visits was to Antarctica last year, where conditions were not known to be kind for the then 77-year-old.

No other head of government has been known to have visited the White Continent while still in office. And he wasn't even seasick! according to New Straits Times Group Editor-in-Chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, one of the 60 select Malaysians who accompanied the Prime Minister.

Dubbed Malaysia's leading salesman, Dr Mahathir has travelled widely, providing information about Malaysia as much as he absorbed knowledge about the places he visited.

The insights he gained from his travels abroad have influenced many of his decisions for Malaysia.

But who would have thought it worth a prime minister's time to visit a place as remote and desolate as Antarctica?

Ninety-eight per cent of the continent is permafrost, with an ice covering that averages 3,000 metres in thickness.

Temperatures are well below freezing and winds with speeds of 160 km per hour rage across the surface.

Antarctica is a virtual no-man's land, with no government, no law and enforcement, no trade, no foreign policy. What bilateral ties were there for a prime minister to speak of in a continent that has no indigenous population?

But those things were never the point in this particular instance. Dr Mahathir's week-long expedition embodied the values and cultures he has spoken about numerous times and wants Malaysians to internalise.

These are lifelong learning, thirst for knowledge, even of things alien to Malaysia, pursuit of science and technology, big dreams, tireless effort and the guts to make it all happen.

Dr Mahathir made Antarctica another object lesson for Malaysians - along with climbing Mount Everest, sailing solo around the globe and more recently, swimming across the English Channel - that no frontier was out of our league.

Dr Mahathir knows that if he wishes Malaysians to be at the frontlines, he first has to be there himself, physically.

So on Feb 6, 2002, the Prime Minister, his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, and the delegation of Cabinet ministers, government officials, scientists and corporate leaders, set sail for the frozen continent on the Russian ice-breaker Kapitan Dranitsyn.

The delegation included three Cabinet members - Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak (Defence), Datuk Seri Law Hieng Ding (Science, Technology and Environment), Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar (Foreign) - and national solo sailor Datuk Azhar Mansor.

Leaving Ushuaia, Argentina, they endured the turbulent seas of the Drake Passage, where many of the passengers had to endure the agonies of seasickness and 10-metre-high waves. A few Malaysians were even flung out of their cabins during the rough passage, including a Cabinet Minister.

This was the first test of resolve and Dr Mahathir proved his mettle in

surviving the adverse conditions, said another minister who was interviewed about the trip.

After two days of rough sailing, the expedition anchored off the Antarctic Peninsula from where they were ferried ashore by zodiac boats from the Dranitsyn and taken for trips to explore the breath-taking landscape of ice floes, icebergs, caves and cliffs.

Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah recorded the sights and their impressions on the personal videocams they had taken along. This footage was later used in a documentary, narrated by Dr Mahathir himself, that was broadcast on Astro's Discovery channel earlier this year.

Perhaps tired from the exertion, many in the Malaysian delegation opted for more relaxing activities when they got back on board the icebreaker, but Dr Mahathir without fail attended each of the thrice-daily scientific lectures on Antarctica. Even the cold could not congeal the thirst for information.

Freezing Antarctica is a hotbed for scientific investigation in microbiology, marine biodiversity, air pollution, global warming and geology, to name but a few.

When he returned to Malaysia, Dr Mahathir expressed the hope that Malaysia would some day have its own research station on the continent.

This is a huge challenge. Enhancing Malaysia's scientific capability for the task is just one aspect of the matter. If Malaysia intends to enter big-league scientific research and wants to set up a permanent base as developed countries have done, the supporting logistics involved would be nearly the equivalent of starting a small country from scratch.

Healthcare, constant food and fuel supply, transport, building, plumbing, cleaning and maintenance and communications are the norm in daily life but in remote Antarctica they will spell success or doom for any endeavour.

Though he is retired, Dr Mahathir will definitely be watching to see if Malaysia can rise to the challenges that he has set, one of which is to send a Malaysian into space by the year 2005.