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Prime ministers never have ordinary assignments

Ahmad A. Talib

FROM KL to London to Stockholm to New York and then to Monte Carlo in a week. A whirlwind of an assignment - and no ordinary one at that.

But then again, prime ministers seldom, or never, have ordinary, mundane and routine assignments.

In London, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad addressed a gathering of academicians, scholars, students and entrepreneurs, where he shared his thoughts on Islam and asked everyone to re-examine their knowledge of the religion. It was held at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in Russel Square.

As in other forums, the Prime Minister was in his element responding to questions, which was not too challenging for someone used to fielding all sorts of questions, friendly or otherwise. There were handshakes, photography session and all that.

There were several Menteri Besar in London, a few looking rather sheepish. They had all been invited to witness the launching of the book on the Prime Minister the following day, but had gathered to hear Dr Mahathir talk.

The gathering of the MBs had created all sorts of speculation, most of which were political in nature. But apparently, a passing remark by Dr Mahathir at the Umno supreme council meeting the day before he left had made two MBs change their plans and decide to stay back to manage their States.

Accompanied by his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Dr Mahathir then moved to Stockholm for a three-day official visit. Again, there were meetings and courtesy calls.

Dr Mahathir spoke to government officials and businessmen and met corporate decision-makers as he tried to persuade them to invest or increase their investments in Malaysia.

Sweden offered him no rest. And New York, too, where he spoke at the United Nations General Assembly. He had addressed the assembly on a number of occasions since his first in 1982.

Despite his scepticism of what the UN could do in bringing about its own reform, Dr Mahathir gave his views on how the world body could democratise itself and not be dictated by any one power.

Mohamad Hassan, one of Malaysia's top automotive executives who was present in New York and witnessed the PM's delivery, sent me an SMS (short text message on the mobile telephone): "PM gave a very good speech. He made me proud to be a Malaysian."

Actually, he is not alone in his views. Which leads me to a tale that I think is worth sharing. When Dr Mahathir was in London, he went for a walk at Hyde Park and stopped to hear one man giving his views at the well-known Speakers' Corner.

The speaker, without a care in the world, lambasted the Muslim community. He was of the view that Muslims are so fragmented that there is little future for them. He opined that no Muslim leader can bring the ummah together and take them out of their misery.

"However, if there is one man who can help the Muslim ummah, I believe that man is that Malaysian leader - Mahathir. I trust him. He is the true Muslim leader."

Surprised by the man's views and probably embarrassed as well, Dr Mahathir inched his way out of the crowd and managed to escape detection

by the speaker and audience. Imagine what would have happened if the speaker had spotted Dr Mahathir in the crowd.

Dr Mahathir then moved on to Monte Carlo, where the atmosphere is more relaxed and gives one an immediate feeling that this is what life is all about _ sitting at a roadside cafe enjoying cappuccino and watching the people, in all shapes and sizes, passing by. Idyllic but costly, very costly.

In Monte Carlo, I sensed that the Prime Minister had a slightly relaxed schedule. At the Monaco Yacht Show, Dr Mahathir was shown yacht after yacht, but I could sense that his mind was already at work. This he confirmed when he spoke to the media before leaving for home on Saturday.

Dr Mahathir envisaged that one day Langkawi could play host to the world's rich and famous when they bring their mega yachts for holiday there. After all, Langkawi offers summer weather all-year round, duty-free shopping, white sandy beaches and clear blue skies.

I sensed also, and so do many others, that the Prime Minister, with slightly more than a month before he retires at the end of October, wants to take his fellow citizens to another level of achievement. It is a process he is never tired of, and one that is in-built in him. His message is clear, consistent and easy to understand: if you want to enjoy the trappings of a good life as in Monte Carlo, then work hard, acquire all knowledge and skills, and keep your head on your shoulder. Insyallah, your dreams will be fulfilled.