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Tough negotiator, dynamic diplomat with a mission in France

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THE story goes that Malaysia's ambassador to France, Datuk Tunku Nazihah Mohamed Rus, was hosting a lunch for a group of French businessmen with a fearsome reputation for being tough negotiators.

She was unfazed. Indeed, she was said to have driven such a hard bargain that the men became as meek as lamb, and smiled weakly when she capped her victory with a "And how do you like my cooking?"

Anyone who has dined at Malaysia House in the elite 16th arrondissement of Paris, will testify to Tunku Nazihah's superb cooking.

But as much as she's a perfect hostess, she's also a tough negotiator and dynamic diplomat who takes a hands-on approach, from leading trade missions to cooking up a storm for parties.

She is sometimes, unsurprisingly, compared to the other tough woman - Minister of International Trade and Industry Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz.

Like Rafidah, Tunku Nazihah, 56, speaks her mind, and that has earned her her critics. But if you talk to her long enough, she has stories that would make you laugh helplessly.

Having served as a diplomat since 1969, in various capacities including as High Commissioner to New Zealand, she knows her mind.

Besides business and high-level government relations, Tunku Nazihah is passionate about fostering people-to-people contact, the most effective way to make Malaysia real to the French.

Despite the warm friendship between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and French President Jacques Chirac, the ties are much looser at the ground level.

The French don't know Malaysia, and Malaysians tend to know France only as a holiday and shopping destination.

Last year, only 27,000 French visited Malaysia, and that's down from the 32,000 in 2001 due to the global economic downturn.

At present, there are about 250 French expatriates living in Malaysia.

More Malaysians may visit France but on a longer-term basis, there are only 600 to 650 Malaysians living there, mostly those married to French citizens.

About 250 Malaysians are studying in France, including 170 Government-sponsored students in information technology and engineering courses.

Compare this with the tens of thousands Malaysians just across the Channel in the United Kingdom.

Tunku Nazihah gives as much emphasis to ground-level work as to high-level talks, and makes time for cultural events like batik promotions and Malaysia Week at Vineuil, a town outside Paris.

A three-week tour by the Istana Negara cultural troupe, a dinner-cum-cultural night in Paris last year, and a visit by golf club presidents to Malaysia are all part of the job.

Visiting Malaysian celebrities are not spared. When Chef Wan visited Paris last October, he found himself co-opted into providing cooking demonstration for the Asean Ladies' Circle. He was a huge hit.

"We take advantage of such visits to organise something different. We need to do things like that," Tunku Nazihah says.

She doesn't mind quirky measures, even supporting a contest where entry forms were printed on boxes of frozen tiger prawns packed by a French company. The prize was a trip to Malaysia, and the response was overwhelming. She is now keen to promote Malaysian textiles in this

fashion capital.

"The Indians have done it successfully. We have batik, songket, pua and so on, and these are exotic to the French," she says.

She managed to get a date to show Malaysian fabrics to the fashion house of Pierre Cardin last year, but could not get the Malaysians to act quickly enough.

The vacated date was snapped up by someone else.

Her residence is also the meeting place for the Malaysian Association in France which was set up last year. Its president is the energetic Wan Hua Chapouthier, a former fashion journalist who now works at Unesco.

The association hopes to give the French a feel of the real Malaysia, and a sense of belonging to Malaysians living in France. Its activities include festive celebrations, picnics, seminars, walkathons and even tai chi lessons.

"Tunku (Nazihah) is our driving force. She's truly dynamic," says Wan Hua who has lived in Paris since 1971 after graduating from Sorbonne University and marrying scientist Dr Georges Chapouthier.

France is very accessible from Kuala Lumpur as Malaysia Airlines had begun flying to Paris six times weekly from March 31, and soon daily from November.

The timing was rather unfortunate as it coincided with the Iraq war and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak but in the long term, there will be benefits to reap.

"It's tough because of the economic situation, but even if the effect is not immediate, we need to make an effort to promote Malaysia. We can't just wait for good times," says Tunku Nazihah.

At the Government level, Malaysia and France have very good bilateral ties. Dr Mahathir is the only Southeast Asian leader invited to the pre-G8 summit in spa town of Evian to be held today, and the first Malaysian leader to receive an invitation.

"It's a great honour for Malaysia, and an opportunity to bring forward issues and share with like-minded countries," says Tunku Nazihah. But on the investment front, it's much less rosy.

From 1998 to 2002, says Malaysian Industrial Development Authority director in Paris Tan Piak Bong, French investment totalled only RM161 million in 23 projects, mostly in the manufacturing sector. There are about 160 French companies in Malaysia, providing 22,000 jobs.

"That's not very high," she admits.

Tan says they are now wooing small- and medium-scale enterprises in France which are anything but small by Malaysian standards.

"The competition is very stiff but once you got them you got them," she says, noting that in the last five years, there were 15 expansion of existing projects and just 10 new projects from French companies.

It's a matter of winning over the French, on all levels.