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Transparency the key to PR success

KUCHING, Sat. - Not enough is being done to correct faulty ideas and complex misconceptions about Malaysia that flourish here and abroad, New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad said today.

Saying that the country was often the "victim of misconception", Abdullah said the potential impact of a false and negative international image was obvious, with the most immediate effect most likely seen in tourism and foreign investment.

He said the pervasiveness of Pas political influence and its effect on the rights of Malaysian women was another element of national life that was often misunderstood or blown out of proportion.

"Tourism Malaysia advertisements featuring footage of our sunlit beaches and muhibbah populace may be good tourist lures.

"But they fall far short of addressing the more complex misconceptions about Malaysia that flourish overseas," Abdullah said in his keynote address at a conference on "Public Relations and Crisis Management in Public Service and Corporate Sector" at the Holiday Inn here.

The seminar, by the Sarawak Development Institute and Kianiaga Sdn Bhd, was opened by Deputy State Secretary Datuk Salleh Sulaiman.

The seminar was attended by chief executive officers of companies, top civil servants, and managers.

"The same can be said of national public relations efforts aimed at Malaysians themselves.

"Although well-intentioned, the advertisements that we have broadcast on television for decades, promoting everything from racial harmony to information technology, are no longer sufficient."

Abdullah said current public relations efforts lacked the sophistication needed to convince more cynical minds.

For example, said Abdullah, when the Government arrested several members of Kumpulan Militan Malaysia in 2001, the action was not fully appreciated by certain quarters until after the events of Sept 11.

"This is a disturbing indication of how we can mishandle public relations with our own public."

According to Abdullah, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had long been the country's best and most recognisable public relations man.

However, said Abdullah, national public relations efforts could not be a oneman enterprise.

Stressing that the time for "singalong TV ads and facile slogans" were over, he said what was needed was a more modern, urbane message, bolstered also by better production values.

"Public relations disasters are usually caused by conflicting objectives. I count our handling of the severe episode of haze a few years ago as among our worst, because our authorities were conflicted between their desire to keep the public informed and the need to stem public alarm."

Abdullah said while public relations was an equally integral mechanism of crisis management, the key to its success was transparency.

"We can take, as an example from the microperspective, the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska. Instead of seeing the media as its partner in communication, Exxon Mobile regarded the Press with suspicion.

"The company's refusal to communicate its plans on how to deal with the

disaster for over a week after it took place only turned the media and public opinion against it.

"When company spokesmen did make statements about Exxon Mobile's ability to handle the oil spill, they only ended up contradicting news footage and on-site witness reports about the severity of the accident."

Another example closer to home, he said, followed an incident last August in which a 60kg safety wheel fell off a KL Monorail train and hit a reporter.

"Again, the train operator KL Monorail System Sdn Bhd's immediate strategy following the accident was to essentially stay silent.

"Rather than make the incident go away, a tactic that relies on the short-lived nature of public memory, the company's strategy backfired and only served to fan media interest."

Abdullah advised that under such circumstances, transparency, a willingness to be upfront about the facts, was the best route to take.

"Indeed, after a meeting with several editors, the company heeded their advice and allowed reporters into the assembly plant so that public concerns about the safety of the monorail trains could be answered."

He cautioned, however, the media were not to be used merely as an organ of dissemination. Editors, he said, were trained to identify pure spin, or some approximation of the truth, when they see it.

Saying that his criticism of the public relations industry in the country had not changed much over the years, Abdullah added that PR often mistook or confused the packaging for what it was meant to contain.

"Thus PR is associated in the public mind with publicity, puffery and hype. In a world that has grown cynical - towards politics, big business and even the media - public relations is increasingly seen to be about polishing surfaces.

"In recent times, an increasingly savvy public has seen PR merely as a vehicle for spin. For a topical case of spin the kind we are all wary of - we can look to the public relations campaign that the US is waging in an attempt to convince the world that war with Iraq was necessary."

He said the US presented a number of reasons for war, from the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the defence of democracy and the salvation of the Iraqi people, to the prevention of terrorist hostilities and progression in the establishment of a Palestinian state.

"But all these barely mask the immediate purpose of war for the United States, which is unimpeded access to Iraqi oil."