

Prime news

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The Press sees a side of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that the public does not encounter. The following is a compilation of anecdotes and witty soundbites from journalists, giving a glimpse of the man behind the Prime Minister.

Nuraina A. Samad
Political Editor

HE gave me my first Page One byline in 1978. I was a rookie reporter just fresh out of college and he was Deputy Prime Minister and Trade and Industry Minister.



Stocks of imported crude
good till May: Mahathir

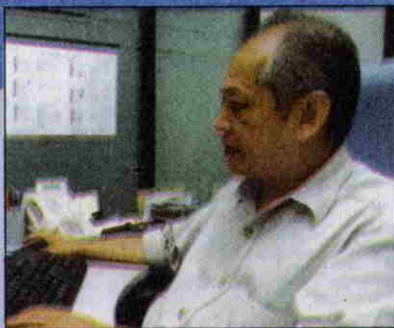
Oil prices
going up
next month

By NURAINA SAMAD: Kuala Lumpur, Monday

DEPUTY Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today oil prices may increase next month depending on the domestic supply situation. The Deputy Prime Minister described the possibility as the "inevitable impact" of the oil price increase by the Opec nations last month. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir, who was speaking to newsmen after opening a teachers' union congress, noted that certain countries, including Indonesia, had already raised their prices. Imported crude oil would be

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Syed Nadzri Syed Harun
Executive Editor



IT was always a pleasure covering Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. He has been a newsman's Prime Minister in all respects — he makes good copy, you get excellent quotes, he knows what the Press photographer wants and he answers all questions thrown at him whether they are silly or not.

He strikes a good rapport too with journalists regularly covering his functions. I still remember a Press conference I attended with an NST colleague, the late Jeffrey Ramayah, about 10 years ago.

As he sat down just before the start, Dr Mahathir looked hard at Jeffrey and said: "How are you today? You forgot to shave." Yes, Jeffrey was indeed looking a little scruffy that day as he was not feeling well.

At the end of his working visits overseas, Dr Mahathir would always casually ask journalists accompanying him: "Hari apa balik?"

In one of his trips earlier this year, he turned to a group of us and said: "After this I will be going to Swaziland. Then Algeria, then Syria ... follow me and you'll get to see these places." He's so friendly.

Dr Mahathir is also famous for his sharp retorts. One of his quips I remember was at a Dow Jones dialogue in Bangkok about seven years ago when he was asked by an Australian reporter whether he was happy about the defeat of Prime Minister Paul Keating to Liberal Party leader John Howard in the just-concluded Australian national election.

"Whether I am happy or not Paul Keating has lost, to me both Howard and Keating are Australians," came the reply.



Saiful Azhar Abdullah
News Editor

WHEN it comes to interviewing Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, reporters, sometimes, have to be sensitive souls.

He might be approachable and friendly towards journalists but after 10 years covering him, one good lesson I have learned was never to take things for granted when coming face to face with this man.

Understand the things which are dear to his heart. Showing that you are less appreciative of

the things which he is sincerely fond of is a big mistake, as one young journalist discovered.

When Dr Mahathir opened Perwaja's rolling mill in Gurun, Kedah, in 1993, he spent many hours touring the plant before meeting the Press and the first question came from this young journalist. "Tun Mustapha wanted to see you to discuss about problems in Usno. Tell us about the meeting."

And the reply we got from the Prime Minister was something the young reporter would want to forget. "If you want to ask about Usno, go to Sabah," he retorted.

Dr Mahathir then grumbled how journalists failed to appreciate the hard work of others (obviously referring to the success of Tan Sri Eric Chia in setting up the plant).

We also learned to ask "PR questions" (soft questions) before going for the crunch when facing Dr Mahathir. But at times we failed.

When the Argentina peso crumbled in 1996, we waited for him at the Langkawi International Airport for his comments.

He took the questions in his stride until I told him that the foreign media tipped the ringgit to be next.

He slapped my wrist and snapped: "Do you believe the foreign media or your Prime Minister?" and walked off.

Zahari Zakaria
Head, Photo Unit



DR MAHATHIR knows how to pose and smile in front of the camera. After 23 years of covering the Prime Minister at home and overseas, I have not seen him turn down even a single request.

During one assignment, Dr Mahathir said: "There are only two professions that when they ask to do something we must oblige — the barber and the photographer. We depend on the barber to get a good hair cut and the photographer, a good picture."

I had no idea that his comments on the domestic oil supply would make the front page of the NST. The question on this was asked by a senior reporter and I, as a neophyte, went through the motions, as it were.

At that time, reporters hardly carried tape recorders so I made sure I took every word Dr Mahathir said as he replied to questions from reporters.

And, as they say, the rest was history — I went on to cover a lot of assignments involving him and he went on to become the Prime Minister.

The trouble with reporters is that they are rarely awed by anyone. But Dr Mahathir was something else. After he took over from Tun Hussein Onn as Prime Minister in 1981, he literally showed his stripes.

The making of the Malaysian car, Look East Policy, Buy British Last and, of course, his criticisms of the US hand in the Palestinian problem made for very interesting copy. In no time, Dr Mahathir became bigger than life. Still, to the lot of us reporters, he was Dr M or the PM whose "call a spade a spade" style was inimitable. Sometimes it was an enigma for us scribes.

And he never pandered to the foreign media. Not for him, that sense of servility some people seem to have when they are in the company of foreign (Western) reporters.

Of course, the time came when I covered him less and less, having assumed other responsibilities. He might not know my name, but I'd like to think that he is not one to forget a familiar face.

So after a long time of not covering him, I went to Kuching just before the 1999 general election to cover the opening of a huge project by him.

At the Press conference he held just before he flew back to Kuala Lumpur, he looked at me with genuine surprise and asked: "You are here now?"

I could only manage a smile and uttered something like: "Oh no, I'm here because of you." Since then, I have learnt to shut up even when spoken to, in case the next faux pas would be worse.

One thing I know, and I am sure other reporters do too, is that the man is indefatigable. He has not stopped his hectic schedule at home and abroad.

I always enjoyed my "foreign Dr M assignments" because he never failed to meet Malaysian journalists at his suite or wherever he was staying. You hardly get his time during local assignments.

And after his heart operation, did we think that he would slow down? No, sir. And after his retirement, do we think he will take it easy? I doubt it.

Sharanjit Singh
Staff Correspondent, Malacca



ASK any journalist and they will agree that it is easy to get a story, a good one that is, from the Prime Minister, regardless of how tough and controversial the subject or question may be.

One particular assignment comes to my mind in the course of covering Dr Mahathir. The incident dates back to the post-Anwar period in the run-up to the 1999 general election.

Dr Mahathir had just returned to campaign in his constituency of Kubang Pasu and had a short luncheon break at the district officer's residence.

Later, an impromptu Press conference was organised at the behest of reporters. During the Press conference, two foreign journalists from England monopolised the question-and-answer session and fired a barrage of questions which bordered on unsubstantiated accusations against the Prime Minister, his Cabinet and even family members.

There was pin-drop silence in the room but to the amazement of all present, Dr Mahathir just smiled and answered each question with unnerving ease and calm.

At the end of the session, Dr Mahathir again turned the tables on the journalists and asked if there were any more questions.

He then went on to initiate a countdown to three seconds before once again smiling and ending the session.

The foreign journalists left dazed and confused as they had expected a different reaction from the Prime Minister.

However, for local journalists familiar with covering Dr Mahathir, the Prime Minister's reaction was typical of him.



If Asia and America can be joint-venture partners in prospering each other, we will surely be the catalyst for a single global Commonwealth of common prosperity.

— On level playing field in global economy, November 1996.

The richer countries want us to open up our markets so that they can sell their goods. They also want to come and do business without any restrictions in our countries. But if we do that, our smaller industries may not be able to compete with them ...

— Commenting on trade liberalisation policy, November 1996.

They constantly tell Malaysia to take the necessary measures to slow down the rapid development which may eventually result in the economy overheating.

— On people envious of Malaysia's development, August 1997.

They want a coalition Government; we can accept but they have to abide by the views of the majority.

— On Barisan Nasional-PAS coalition government, November 1996.