

On the fast track with PM

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I HAVE covered the Prime Minister on over 40 assignments overseas and the thing that always struck me is his enormous energy and stamina. Here is a man who looked like the word "rest" never existed in his vocabulary. His overseas trips have always been punishing and for younger people like us, especially the aides and journalists, it has always been a problem keeping up with him.

During such trips, it is just not merely making speeches and appearing for the media for photo opportunities but plenty of gruelling deals taking place.

Sometimes these meetings involved opportunities for Malaysia but many times, Dr Mahathir took great pains to be the country's Number One salesman. He had to convince foreigners why they should invest in Malaysia, against other competing neighbours, and this in turn created millions of jobs for our people.

He also had to convince foreigners to buy from Malaysia which, in turn, benefited the people of Malaysia.

I remembered one whirlwind trip to Botswana. After a long-haul trip, we were only too happy to grab some time to sleep when we reached the hotel.

One aide, who was taking care of the Press, decided to take a familiarisation trip to the city while most of us were asleep.

But the Prime Minister decided to meet us. There was panic. We quickly dressed up but the aide was nowhere to be found.

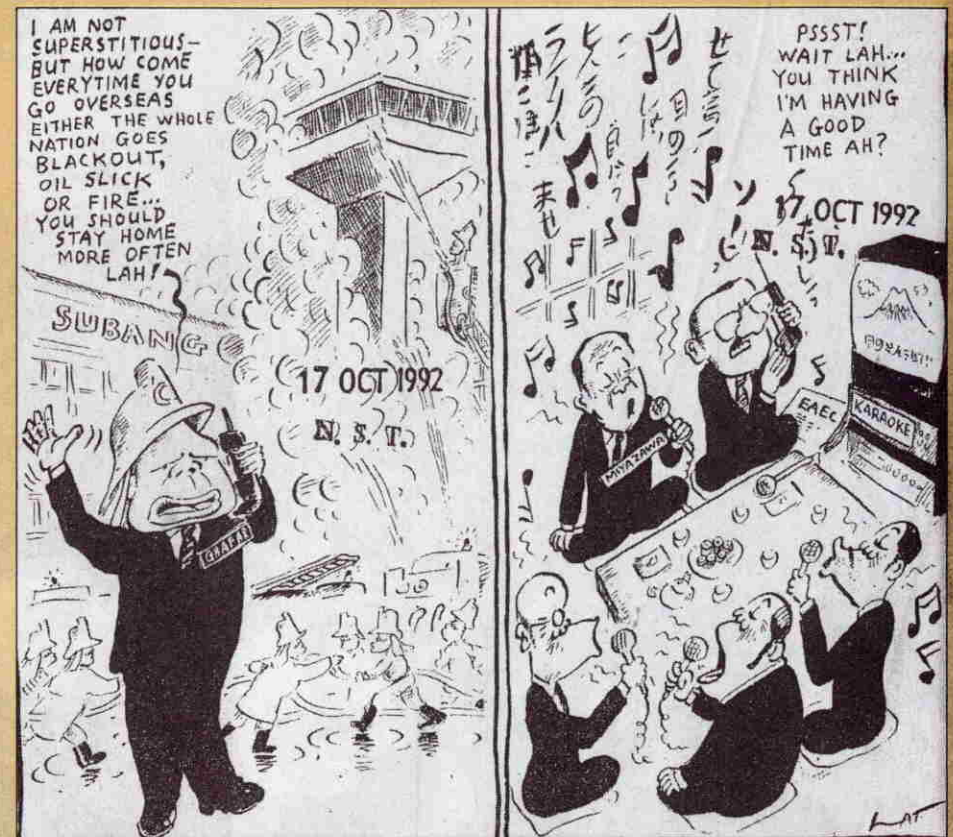
This happened to businessmen and officials in other trips as well. Most of the time his schedule would end only around midnight.

Many of us also admired his alertness. He was quick to spot or pick up something whenever he travelled overseas. Once, he took out his camera to snap some pictures of some dustbins while overseas because he felt the design was good.

He also took pictures of trees and plants he saw overseas because he found that the leaves did not drop too much on the streets. It would cut down on the time clearing up the streets and would also make the roads less dangerous for motorists.

Nothing was too small for him. At factories he visited, he would answer serious questions, particularly those involving manufacturing and information technology, taking down notes when necessary.

That's the Prime Minister we knew and would miss.



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DR MAHATHIR'S functions are pretty easy to deal with but that does not mean you don't follow protocol.

If you want to ask him questions, just ask his aides. If he does not want to, his aides will tell you so.

Even when he is not in the "mood" to field questions from us, he would at least acknowledge our presence.

In his position, he does not have to do so but when he sees our group, he will lift both hands and gesture "nothing" to us before departing.

Over the years, those covering Dr Mahathir will cultivate a friendship with his aides and in the process gain their trust. That however does not give you the passport to ambush the Prime Minister whenever you see him.

Last year, while covering his official visit to Poland, I bumped into a schoolmate, a Syrian engineer working in Warsaw.

On Dr Mahathir's last night in Warsaw, he attended a dinner hosted by Malaysians at the hotel and when I brought along my Syrian friend, who is an admirer of the Prime Minister, into the ballroom, he had a shock.

His first question was: "Where is security?" I told him Malaysians are not terrorists. Eventually he managed to get his photo taken with the Prime Minister who stopped by at our table and I introduced the two men.

I would like to say that other countries have gone through worse. The problem with Malaysia is that we have had it so good for so long. So when there is a little bit of a crisis, we start to panic! We shouldn't panic... there is a way to handle this thing.

— Assuring the country that Malaysia would recover from the economic crisis, October 1997.

If it is happening it is not because we planned it. It is never the Government's policy to segregate races.

— on integration among students, December 2001.