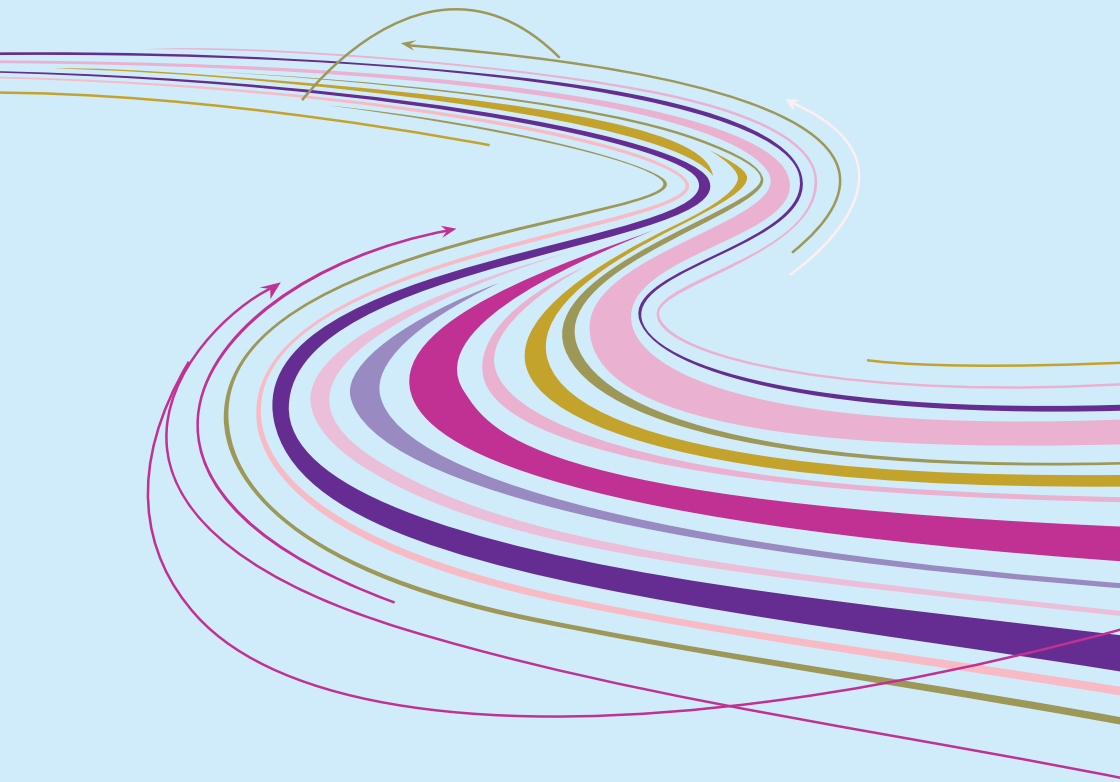


Malaysian Diplomats:

Our Stories



Volume 2

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Foreword

IDFR is pleased to present to you the second volume of *Malaysian Diplomats: Our Stories*.

This volume follows the publication of the inaugural book on the experiences of Malaysian diplomats, *Number One Wisma Putra*, and its sequel, *Malaysian Diplomats: Our Stories, Volume 1*, in 2006 and 2011, respectively.

A Malaysian diplomat's job is to protect our country's sovereignty and defend our national interests. Regardless of where he/she is posted to: a big or a small country, a peaceful or a country in conflict, the job is the same. Our diplomats are our nation's representatives in all these countries.

People tend to visualise the life of diplomats as glamorous and enchanting. It may be true that in the course of their work, they may get the opportunity to meet with Kings and Queens, Presidents, Prime Ministers, Ministers, and people from the high society of the countries they are posted to.

On the flip side, diplomats also face their fair share of challenges. While at posts, a few of our diplomats personally experienced war. Others faced the arduous task of overseeing complex issues related to the downing of a Malaysian plane, for example, or had to leave the country they are posted to on short notice after being classified as persona non grata. Several diplomats had to organise urgent evacuations of our citizens in war-torn countries. One was even held hostage, together with over a hundred other diplomats, at the hands of a rebel group.

In terms of personal challenges, some had to make the difficult decision of leaving their family behind when posted to countries deemed hardship posts, hence missing out on watching their children grow or attending important family events. Others were not able to make it home to pay their last respects upon the passing of their loved ones. Yet, despite all the trials and tribulations, our diplomats take each challenge in their stride and persevere, all in the service for the King and Country.

I wish to record my deepest appreciation to all the twelve contributors for sharing their reflections and first-hand experiences with us. It is hoped that the stories captured in this volume, and future volumes, will benefit the readers in one way or another and will be used as reference for our junior colleagues. These stories must be shared for posterity.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my heartfelt appreciation to the selection committee, IDFR's Heads of Centres and Division: Ms. Hafzah Abdullah, Ms. Nuryante Mohd Yazid, Mr. Ruzaimi Mohamad, Ms. Norli Muadza Mohd Noor and Mr. Hamizan Hashim. My sincere thanks also go out to the English teachers from the Centre for Languages and Cultural Diplomacy: Ms. Afida Ibrahim and Ms. Sithira Devi Govindan; and the secretariat from the Corporate Affairs Section: Ms. Shanthini Subramaniam, Ms. Noraini Awang Nong, Ms. Dzuita Mohamed and Ms. Cornelia Chin, for bringing this book to fruition.

Dato' Mohd Zamruni Khalid

Director General

Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations

August 2021

On His Majesty's Service

Abdullah Faiz Zain

“Travelling - it leaves you speechless, then turns you into a storyteller”.
Ibn Battuta

My odyssey began 40 years ago the day I knocked on the doors of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 1 December 1981. Armed with a degree in Ecology from University of Malaya and not International Relations or Law, I was fresh out of a year's Diploma in Public Administration course and was ready to join Public Service as a diplomat.

The story I am about to relate is but one of the many “misadventures” I had as a diplomat, and more so as a serving ambassador. I was privileged to be posted as ambassador to three countries, each unique in its own perspective, but sharing a common trait – all were post conflict countries. The dictum “An Ambassador is an honest man sent abroad to lie for his country” by Henry Wotton comes to mind.

We have embassies designated as hard posts where family members are left behind in Malaysia for security and safety reasons such as Libya, North Korea and Mali (both closed). Except for Chile, my two other ambassadorial posts in Timor-Leste and Yemen were without my family. Missing all the family anniversaries and birthdays was no fun. My daughter, Ayra, was three when I was in Timor-Leste and about ten when I was about to retire in Yemen. These are some of the many sacrifices an ambassador or a diplomat has to make unknown to the public.

The People's Republic of Timor-Leste

I was posted as Malaysia's first Ambassador to Timor-Leste a year after its

Independence in 2002. It was the youngest nation then having fought a war of independence from Indonesia for 27 years. The freedom fighter José Alexandre Kay Rala “Xanana Gusmao” became its first President. For a country that is young, it boasts two Nobel Peace Laureates – Jose Ramos Horta, the Timorese Foreign Minister, and Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, the Archbishop of Dili. I have not visited Timor-Leste since I left in 2006 and would love to do so soon. My stint in Timor-Leste was penned in the *Number One Wisma Putra* book published by IDFR in 2006, titled *From the Ashes, a New Nation Reborn*.

Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste erupted into civil unrest a month after my departure, a rather similar event when I left Sana’a, Yemen.

The Republic of Yemen

My last ambassadorial posting before retirement was to the Republic of Yemen in 2012.

Sana’a, the capital of Yemen, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. The old city Sana’a is a magnificent and historical tribute to the glory of Yemen and is now a UNESCO Heritage site. There are many UNESCO Heritage sites in Yemen including the ancient Great Mosque of Sana’a, one of the oldest mosques in the world. It was built at the behest of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in 633 AD. In Hadramawt, one is amazed to see the sixth century mud scraper city of Shibam made of mud bricks, also known as the “Manhattan of the Desert”. Like Sana’a, Shibam is one of the longest living city located at an important ancient trade route.

Yemen was my first and only Middle East posting. I presented my credentials to President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi of the “new” Yemen after the fall of President Ali Abdullah Salleh. He was a casualty of the Arab Spring in 2011.

I had a three-storey bungalow all to myself as my family was not with me. I called it my “Fortress of Solitude” where I am surrounded by a fifteen foot high wall inside all alone and outside from the neighbourhood. I had security escorts everywhere I went which I thought was unnecessary. Except for official functions, I would occasionally venture out on my own and never felt unsafe as many Yemenis are fond of Malaysia, especially of our former

Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Yemen even invited Tun Dr. Mahathir to be its Special Economic Adviser.

The Sana'a crisis in September 2014 prompted the Malaysian Government to evacuate most Malaysian students there. The evacuation did not include our students in Hadramawt and other provinces such as Aden and Hodeidah as the situation there was relatively calm and safe.

There was a great future for Yemen. It saw a peaceful transition to a new Yemen and took several baby steps towards national reconciliation and dialogue. The country, which had a strategic plan until 2025, began a series of National Dialogue with a strong roadmap to bring law and order to the country. The country has enormous potential, not only in terms of natural wealth and resources, but also in its well-educated, young population.

What was a promising start to a “new nation” and the progress made in the political transition led by the United Nations, ended three years later – a month after I left the post in February 2015 – in a turn of events which changed the course of Yemen's history back to square one. To date, the regional proxy war in Yemen which is into its sixth year continues unabated and is seeing no end.

The Republic of Chile

My posting to Chile, which lasted four years, was my longest ambassadorial posting, and the first to a Latin American country. The first thought that came to mind when I was being reassigned from Timor-Leste to Chile in 2006 was the distance from home.

Chile was ruled by a military strongman Augusto Pinoche Ugarte after a military coup which toppled democratically elected President Salvador Allende. It was estimated that about 3,000 people died or disappeared during his reign of terror lasting almost 30 years. Coincidentally the military coup took place on 11 September 1975, on the same date as the attack on the World Trade Centre Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001, 26 years later. Chile has been ruled by a democratically elected Government since.

Interestingly, although our countries are separated by the Pacific Ocean, many Chileans know Malaysia by the novel written by Emilio Salgari in 1895 titled *Sandokan: Tiger of Malaysia*. Sandokan is about a friendly pirate who roams the South China Sea and fights the “bad guys” in a fictitious country called Malaysia when the name or country Malaysia did not even exist then. It is a school textbook in Chile.

Movies and television series have been made of Sandokan. *The Return of Sandokan* was made, with not a Malaysian but an Indian actor Kabir Bedi reprising the role of Sandokan. The Italian series *Sandokan*, which fictionally took place in Sabah, Malaysia was filmed on Kapas Island, a small tropical island with white sandy beaches and dense jungle across the town of Marang, Terengganu.

The “first” Malaysian to visit Chile was back in the 16th century known as Panglima Awang. But to the Spanish he is Enrique de Malaca or Henry the Black. He acted as a translator to Magellan. He was a Malay member of the Magellan-Elcano expedition that completed the first circumnavigation of the globe in 1519-1522.

Panglima Awang is said to be the first person to circumnavigate the globe. Although the Cape of Magellan of the southern tip of Chile was named after Magellan, he never completed the circumnavigation as he was killed in the Philippines. President Michelle Bachelet acknowledged this historical fact in her luncheon speech honouring the Yang di-Pertuan Agong during His Majesty’s Royal Visit.

I arrived in Santiago, Chile a few months earlier before the installation of President elect Veronica Michelle Bachelet Jeria as the first woman president of Chile. I was eager to present my credentials to Bachelet but alas, it was not to be as I presented mine to President Ricardo Lagos instead. Ironically, Bachelet was a General’s daughter killed by the Pinochet junta who became President.

Santiago is a beautiful and historic city which is more than 480 years old. Just like the city of Sana’a, Santiago reflects in a unique way the history, culture and tradition of this great nation. Surrounded by the Andes, Santiago is

indeed a Garden City as there are many broad boulevards lined with trees and parks dotting the city landscapes. It is the city where the old and the modern coexist.

Malaysia and Chile established diplomatic relations about three decades ago. Chile today has become a role model and the envy of many in the region. Sadly, I was back home when Chile celebrated her Bicentennial Anniversary in 2010.

One of the biggest moments of my career was the Royal Visit of His Majesty Yang di-Pertuan Agong and Her Majesty Raja Permaisuri Agong to Santiago from 19 to 22 April 2009. The task then seemed insurmountable as I was given less than a month's notice.

My wife and I had the pleasure and honour of playing hosts to their Majesties at a dinner held at Rumah Malaysia, the official Residence of the Ambassador. I could have taken the easy way out and hosted it at a prominent hotel in Santiago. Instead, I chose to have it at the Residence to give their Majesties a homely welcome. My daughter Ayra will cherish forever the honour given to present the Permaisuri a bouquet of flowers upon arrival at the Residence.

The dinner was held in the garden. A huge two-storey canopy complete with chandeliers was set up and the swimming pool was covered to make a stage for the cultural performance. A giant LED screen was put up on stage complete with a sound and lighting system. It was a Canopy in the Garden and a Garden in the Canopy as some garden trees and shrubs were left untouched inside the canopy.

We had approximately 400 guests comprising ASEAN Ambassadors, Malaysians and Chileans. The theme colour of the evening was yellow to give it a royal flavour. Potted yellow chrysanthemums were placed around the stage and yellow lilies were placed on the tables. The setting was picture perfect fit for the Royal Couple.

I have delivered many speeches before our Prime Ministers, at National Day receptions, fora and seminars, schools, even in the presence of former Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu when he was Ambassador at the United Nations

and I was a struggling junior diplomat then. I had delivered a speech at the First Committee, United Nations condemning Israel for the atrocities against the Palestinians.

But addressing His Majesty was a first for me. There was etiquette and protocol to be observed, so I sought the advice of colleagues at Istana Negara. I made my introduction in Malay with all the formalities of the Court Language, and subsequently apologised and sought His Majesty's permission to speak in English for the sake of my Chilean guests. I felt elated, excited and humbled.

The Bafochi Ballet Dance Troupe Santiago put on a grand cultural performance of Chilean folk tales and modern dances. A school principal, Marlene Dumont Soto, who went to Malaysia under the MTCP, also organised a children's performance by her school, Liceo Victor Jara de La Pintana, named after a famous Chilean poet.

It was truly a glittering dinner as the weather was kind. The moon draped the canopy with its glowing light and the stars twinkled in the evening sky. It was an enchanting fairy-tale evening to be cherished. Missing was Cinderella with her horses, mouse, pumpkin and glass slippers.

After 34 years ...

After 34 years, someone asked me how I would sum up in one word my years in Wisma Putra. Despite my share of trials and tribulations, my unhesitating answer was "enriching." This surprised me more as I had never thought about it. I was then asked to elaborate further.

Among others, as ambassador, I had the privilege and honour of receiving Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Dr. Siti Hasmah accompanied by some members of the Cabinet and captains of industry, on an official visit to Timor-Leste less than a month after presenting my credentials to President Xanana Gusmao. I was not only the first Malaysian Ambassador to Timor-Leste, but it was my first posting as an ambassador. The visit was the first by a Head of State after Timor-Leste's independence. Three days after the visit, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad retired as Prime Minister having served the country for 21 years.

I had a short stint at IDFR where Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa, the Secretary General of the Ministry then, tasked me to develop a six-month Foreign Service Programme. The Diploma in Diplomacy programme was opened to officers from Wisma Putra and other ministries and Government departments.

Apart from classroom lectures, IDFR introduced for the first time a climb up the majestic Mount Kinabalu. The experience was not only a test of physical and mental endurance but also leadership. The bond of camaraderie among the officers was strengthened as they helped each other to reach the top safely. Watching the spectacular sunrise at the summit of the highest mountain in Southeast Asia gave a sense of accomplishment and wonder at the manifestation of God's creation and beauty.

IDFR was then tasked to organise the Wisma Putra International Charity Bazaar 2011 from 16 to 17 April 2011 to raise funds for the Ministry's Ladies' Association (PERWAKILAN). Datin Sri Siti Rubiah Datuk Abdul Samad, the spouse of the Foreign Minister then, officiated the Opening Ceremony. We succeeded in raising, if my memory serves me right, approximately RM65,000 for the association coffer. Several embassies, universities, schools, and companies participated in the bazaar. There were cultural performances by the embassies and the schools, and food fairs and stalls selling a variety of goods. I will never forget the tireless efforts by the staff of IDFR who put their hearts and souls into organising such an event.

In a cloak-and dagger mission in early 2000, Malaysia defied U.S unilaterally "no-fly zone" sanction in Iraq and flew a MAS 747 to Baghdad with Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar and Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak, the Foreign Minister and the Secretary General respectively then, and 300 passengers including me as entourage. There were some drama when permission was not granted at the last minute by a friendly Muslim country to fly over the country's airspace and we were told to detour. We were escorted by fighter jets out of their airspace but finally reached Baghdad safely. Tan Sri Syed Hamid and Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi were given the honour to call on President Saddam Hussein.

As a junior officer, I was also an eyewitness to Aung San Suu Kyi winning

the 1990 election in Yangon, Myanmar after the civil unrest brought the downfall of strongman General Ne Win. I even had the pleasure of having lunch with President Fidel Castro when Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi visited Cuba as Foreign Minister. I still have a photo of me shaking hands with the President displayed in my house.

Not forgetting the Renault Espace that I lost in the Atlantic Ocean. The container, loaded with my car and personal belongings such as clothes and photos, and 27 containers belonging to others fell overboard from the ship which was en route to New York from Port Klang in a heavy storm. Losing the car was not really a loss as it could be replaced but what was irreplaceable were the photos with so many memories. Unfortunately, I did not get any compensation from the insurance company as apparently I had failed to read the “small print”. As for the Government, I tried. So, my family and I arrived in New York literally with the shirts on our back.

To sum it all up, yes, I had an enriching 34 years on His Majesty’s Service.

Ambassador Abdullah Faiz Zain was born in his grandmother’s house on Jalan Barat in Pudu, Kuala Lumpur. He went to Petaling Jaya Primary School, La Salle Brickfields and Victoria Institution. He retired on 14 February 2015.

My Early Days in Almaty

Agus Salim Yusof

It was in December 2000 when I first arrived in Almaty, a strange city to most Malaysians who do not even know where on earth it is. I arrived there by Air Kazakhstan from Bangkok.

As I was seated in the second last row, I was among the last passengers to reach the airport's immigration hall. I had nothing to rush for, after all. My passport was scrutinised longer than usual by the immigration officer who posed some questions I did not understand. I could not speak a word of Russian except for *spasibo* (thank you), and neither could he speak any English. I sensed trouble. All the other passengers had left the counters, except for me. The Embassy's Second Secretary, Abdul Shukor Hussain, was waiting for me at the arrival hall. He must have been wondering why I had not appeared as everyone else was about to leave the luggage collection area. (It was the only flight arriving at the time). Finally, Shukor appeared, introduced himself to me, and saved me from the ordeal. The offence was that my visa, issued by the Kazakh Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, showed that I was supposed to arrive the day before. Apparently, this is one of the "technicalities" often practised by immigration personnel in some countries.

I was accommodated at the Regent Almaty, supposedly the best, international standard hotel in the city. As it was at the height of winter, the hotel received very few guests and it was nearly empty. Furthermore, it was *Ramadan*. I requested the hotel to convert my complimentary breakfast to pre-dawn meal (*sahur*) and to send it to my room. I think the hotel staff who handled my food must have found it strange to have a guest who was fasting, and I was pretty sure that no one else among the guests was fasting. Back then, it was difficult to get *halal* meat in the country. I had no choice but to indulge

in spaghetti bolognaise, eggs, yoghurt, and bread and butter as my *sahur*. After three days of the same food, I felt like I could not take it anymore. The room service offerings cost a fortune. Food stalls were nowhere to be found, and I did not want to take the trouble of getting a taxi to an eatery in the wee hours of the morning in freezing temperature.

One evening after breaking fast, I went to the hotel gym for a workout. After a while I felt dizzy. I was short of breath, drenched in sweat, and almost fainted. I sat down on a bench but the dizziness did not go away. I knew I needed medical attention and asked the gym staff to call the paramedic. After listening to my explanation, the paramedic said that my body has not yet adjusted to being in a high altitude place like Almaty and I was short of oxygen. Furthermore, I was working out after fasting during the day. Together with the paramedic was the hotel's assistant sales director, a Turkish gentleman by the name of Murat. He was the one who welcomed me when I first arrived at the hotel. We became friends. Murat then left Almaty for another stint in Eastern Europe and married a Russian woman. To my surprise, we met again three years later when he returned to work at the same hotel.

After the permissible five-day hotel stay, I moved into the government-rented bungalow left by my predecessor, Hashim Ismail. Obviously it was too big a house for me as a single officer. I also retained Hashim's live-in maid, a Kazakh lady named Bibigul, affectionately called Vika. What a relief for me to have company in that big house. I needed her for cooking and washing. However, Vika could only cook one or two Malay dishes. What was worse was we could not communicate verbally due to language barriers. It was not a problem for Hashim as he could speak Russian, thanks to his successive postings in Moscow, Tashkent and Almaty. I remember calling Marina, the embassy's interpreter, whenever I wanted to instruct Vika to prepare a meal or do other things. With Vika standing next to me, we passed the phone receiver back and forth to speak to Marina.

Night time was longer than day time during winter. Every day after sunset, I locked myself in my bedroom and spent the hours mostly reading. I hardly watched the television as only Kazakh and Russian channels were available. The Embassy received on a monthly basis magazines published by Dewan

Bahasa dan Pustaka – *Dewan Masyarakat*, *Dewan Siswa*, *Dewan Kosmik*, *Dewan Budaya*, and *Pelita Bahasa*. I started to enjoy reading them. I spent my nights reading every issue and continued to read them throughout my stay in Almaty. Many Malaysians do not appreciate these magazines much but they are actually loaded with information. I also scanned some of the outdated Malaysian newspapers the embassy received every fortnight by diplomatic cargo. It was during this self-imposed lockdown that I experienced the most depressing time in my life. I did make a phone call to my mother once in a while. I wish I could do it every day but unlike the technology we have today, the exorbitant international call charges then had made it uneconomical to do so. I always looked forward to going to the office because it provided me with the opportunity to interact with the outside world and to free myself from the lockdown.

Then came *Hari Raya* on 27 December. Besides myself, Shukor was the other Muslim home-based officer at the embassy. He invited me to his house on the first day of *Hari Raya*. The next day, Mr. Nik Zainal Nik Yusoff, also known as Pak Nik Zainal, Regional Director of the Islamic Development Bank based in Almaty invited us to his house. At that time, there were only a few Malaysians working and living in Kazakhstan. Pak Nik Zainal and his wife were known to be the only Malay family there. Other than visiting the two houses, the *Hari Raya* atmosphere was not felt the way we are used to in Malaysia.

After several days of being chauffeur-driven to and from work, I started to drive using the embassy's Volvo 940 GL. As someone who is used to driving Japanese cars, I must say that it takes a strong person to handle this car. The accelerator, the brake and the clutch pedal as well as the gear lever felt tight to press or shift. It was also my first time driving on snowy or icy roads. It was challenging as one had to be extra careful and avoid speeding. To go to places other than the embassy, I had to rely on the printed city map. I faced another challenge as all the road signs and signboards were written in Cyrillic letters. However, since some of the letters are similar to Roman alphabets, like a, b, e, k, m, o, t, v, w and z, it helped me to make some wild guesses on the street names and signboards. It also helped that Almaty's road layout is mostly parallel. During the Soviet era, Almaty was a military outpost, which probably explains why the roads were built in such a way. So if you miss a

junction, you can always enter the next junction and turn back.

A few days before the year ended, one of Hashim's friend, Saule, called my office line to introduce herself and to invite me to her company's year-end dinner party. I hesitated to go but she insisted and offered me a ride. It was at a restaurant where I had my first taste of a Soviet-style party. Just like other parties I had attended later in this part of the world, I found that people in the former Soviet Republics could sing and dance, and were not hesitant to do so. They could also speak off the cuff and tend to make long-winded speeches. Their children also have the confidence to speak in front of a crowd, something which children in Malaysia should emulate.

I was at the party for more than an hour. I did not know anyone except for Saule whom I just met that day. Everybody was speaking in Russian. The songs that they danced to were also Russian. Suddenly one of Saule's office mate approached me and introduced herself. Her name is Anara but she told me to call her Ann. She was an attractive Kazakh lady in her early 20s. We chatted for a while and I was impressed by her ability to speak good English and her courage to strike a conversation with a foreign stranger like me. Weeks later, I managed to get Ann's number from Saule, and we met a few times after that.

Almaty to me was a charming city. Many were puzzled when I told them that I considered Kazakhstan as my best overseas posting. I loved the view of the snow-capped mountains from my window panes. I loved going to the ballets, operas, jazz and classical shows at the many ornate concert halls. I loved riding the ski lifts and snow sliding at the nearby ski resort. I loved the nightlife and watching the youngsters dancing away in clubs. I loved the panoramic mountainous view at the golf course. I loved the breathtaking steppe landscape on my train ride to Astana. I loved the unforgettable changing landscape on my drive to Bishkek. I loved the safety when driving home even after midnight. I loved the tasty Turkish food available everywhere. I loved shopping for crystal wares, paintings and rugs. And the list goes on.

Thirteen years after I left Almaty, I visited the city in 2018 with my family and went down memory lane. My wife and my son loved the city too. The city had not changed much. My "broken" Russian proved to be useful again

and my family was impressed. While my wife was busy trying to get an e-hailing service on her phone, I told her that this is a city where almost any car can be a taxi. All you have to do is to stand by the road side, flag down any passing car and negotiate the fare with the driver. That was what we did although she was sceptical at first. However, do this at your own risk!

I almost became a “victim” once again to an immigration officer, this time when I was leaving the country. But that incident did not stop me from wishing to be in Almaty again someday.

Ambassador Agus Salim Yusof was born and raised in Johor Bahru and was the first Universiti Utara Malaysia graduate to become a diplomat in 1995. He had been posted to Kuwait, Kazakhstan, Brunei Darussalam, southern Philippines and South Africa. He was the Ambassador to Bahrain from 2017 to 2021.

Of Guns without Bullets

Ahmad Izlan Idris

I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 1984 and was first assigned to the Protocol Division as Assistant Secretary (Privileges). At that time, the Protocol Division was made up of three different units i.e. Ceremonials, Privileges and Treaty. As someone new and inexperienced, I had to learn the ropes pretty fast. And it was fast, embarrassingly very fast.

After about a month on the job, I was assigned as the duty officer at an official dinner to be hosted by Tun Ghazali Shafie, the Foreign Minister at that time, and at the Paddock, Kuala Lumpur Hilton to boot! Yes, it was one of the 'in' places to be at the time. It was my first time to be assigned as duty officer for an important event. Usually the task would fall on one of the two Assistant Secretaries from the Ceremonials Unit, but they were occupied with an official visit.

That morning I was called by the Senior Assistant Secretary (Ceremonials) to help out. He told me not to worry as everything had been arranged, and that the assignment was a training and an exposure for me. No arguments there, and I thought that it was such a simple task.

My job as duty officer, among others, was to ensure that the guests were properly seated at the dinner table according to the table seating plan drawn up earlier by the Ceremonials Unit, and that all other arrangements were in order. The guests' name cards were placed properly at the dinner table, and after going through the checklist several times, I was satisfied that everything was in order.

I was happily looking forward to the black pepper steak at the bar-restaurant

next to the dining room. Free meal! Well, what can I say? I have never had my meals at such a posh place before. And oh, I bought a new silk *batik* shirt just for the occasion. I think it cost me RM80, which was a bundle then for someone who has not even received his first pay check!

When the Minister arrived, I received him at the hotel lobby and took him up to the Paddock to greet some of the guests who had arrived early. We waited for a while for the other guests to arrive. Then the Minister received information from his Special Officer that three of his guests (if I remember correctly) were not able to make it to the dinner. The Minister then pulled me aside and asked me remove the extra chairs and to rearrange the guests' seating accordingly.

This was where my problems started. I began to rearrange the guests' seating by shuffling their name cards at the table according to the limited knowledge that I had about the 'protocol order of precedence', and pulling out the extra chairs. Everyone knows that guests' seating at the table at an official dinner is based on the principle of their protocol order of precedence.

Then everything became a blur when the Minister lost his patience when he saw that I looked lost and was unsure of what I was doing. I was taking too long, and he was obviously unhappy with the rearranged seating that I had done. He then took my hand and started shoving it around on the table seating plan (you know, that sheet of parchment paper on which the seating plan was shown), telling me in a not so gentle manner and in a loud booming voice in front of all the guests that 'so and so' should be moved here and another 'so and so' should be seated there and so on. And more importantly, I was told to avoid placing any female guests at the end of the table. By then I was already having cold sweats and panic crept in. Oh God, how I wished I could have disappeared then.

After getting things done to the satisfaction of the Minister, I went up to him and apologised for my incompetence and left the room feeling dejected and embarrassed. It was an important dinner for the Minister and I failed him. Of course the Minister had every right to be angry at me. My incompetence also did not reflect well on him and the Ministry especially when it involved foreign guests.

The Minister's Special Officer did his best to comfort me but to no avail as I was too 'traumatised' by the experience. Anyway, I did have the black pepper steak that evening but obviously it did not taste that good. In fact it was tasteless! I was not able to get any sleep that night either! The next day at work, some people were making jokes about what had happened, but others were very understanding and tried to console me.

Suffice to say, it was the most harrowing experience for me at that time in my young career, and I told myself that I would never want to go through that again. Yes, everybody would agree that it takes time for young officers to gain experience and knowledge, in order to sharpen their skills/tradecraft, and acquire the confidence to carry out their responsibilities well. However, being new and green at my job was not an excuse, and I had made too many assumptions that things would go according to plan.

What I did not know then was that the protocol order of precedence was just a guide and not rigid. For example, flexibility is allowed in not placing a female guest at the end of the table even though her position is lower in the order of precedence than male guests. Well, that was the protocol practice at that time as it was regarded ungentlemanly to place a lady at the end of the table.

While I was upset with myself mostly, and embarrassed by the experience, I had learned a valuable lesson. I told myself that I would never again go into 'battles' without fully preparing myself. As duty officer at the dinner that evening, it was akin to me entering the battlefield carrying a gun without any bullets!

From this experience, I learned very early in my diplomatic career not to make any assumptions, and to ensure that I make adequate preparations for any task and to acquire the skills needed – even on matters as simple as setting up a dinner table or writing a diplomatic note. I needed to know my stuff, learn and do more, sharpen my skills, read more, ask questions, take the initiative and anticipate problems in order for me to be a better officer.

In our line of work, mistakes have consequences, and are basically a result of not being fully prepared, and by making too many assumptions. I had to

learn the hard way. Had I fully prepared myself that night, I think I would have kept my cool, reacted professionally and done a much better job. The bottom line is this – learn from our mistakes and that of others. Each of us has our own way of preparing and bettering ourselves. Find yours.

Dato' Ahmad Izlan Idris was born in Alor Setar in 1958. He graduated with a Bachelor of Science from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia before joining the Administrative and Diplomatic Service and was assigned to Wisma Putra in January 1984. He served in various capacities, both at home and abroad, twice as Ambassador – first in Peru (2008-2011) and last in Japan (2015-2018) – before retiring in December 2018.

For Love of King and Country: Reflection on Twenty-Four Years as a Malaysian Diplomat

Azhari-Karim

First Impressions

As a Junior Officer in the Service, you begin to want to impress upon your seniors at the earliest available opportunity. One such opportunity had come my way. It was at one of the Morning Prayer Meetings (a practice that brought together all officers in the Ministry to review and evaluate events and development around the world on a weekly basis), an event most people feared to miss. In the Chair was the then Secretary-General, the late Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie who presided. As was his habit he would go around the table with his eyes wide open to catch unprepared young officers like me and he would quickly pop out questions with rapid suddenness,

“Why did you join?”

In quick tempo I replied,

“To observe human behaviour”.

“Huh”, he said (Hiding the interest at my answer).

More important still, I had believed, the late Tan Sri, later Tun, otherwise called “King Ghaz” (after the famous comic strip character of old) by all of us who came to grow very fond of him over the years, now deceased, had upon reflection, fired an angry retort, and lunged at me imperiously for this unwarranted impudence.

Diplomacy Generally

As I rose through the ranks of the service and became an Ambassador, I came to appreciate every single moment of my experiences either in Malaysia or abroad. As a diplomat for the country one could sense that we are always at the forefront of developments overseas and getting used to the ups and downs of diplomacy. As said by Sir Harry Nicolson (1939, 1988), diplomats are those enjoying the travails of being “diplomatic” at what we are doing and we were never ourselves. I am afraid I would have to disagree with this. Frankly speaking wherever we are and whenever we are at our job, we never ever felt we were just acting or worse, pretending or having thoughts of being ‘sent abroad to lie for the country’! We were serious in carrying out our duties. After twenty-four or so years at being ‘seriously’ diplomatic I considered myself as being more adept at the job, moved really by the love of King and Country.

Bombed out of Cambodia

I nearly lost my life one fine morning in my house situated not far from the Independence Monument in Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital. On that fateful morning the Khmer Rouge had planted a whole cartload of home-made explosives right in front of my house. It came to pass that these were meant for the United States Ambassador who would usually use the route on his way to the US Embassy. But the cache of bombs went off too early that morning and had missed the target. I could have become the unwilling victim, but I had instead taken a longer toilet break!

A week later I got on a flight and returned to Kuala Lumpur. I had survived my first ordeal without a scratch. It was whispered in my ears sometime later that the incident was staged-managed in front of my house to register a Khmer Rouge protest over the perceived Malaysian position of siding with the United States in the Cambodian Civil War.

A Neutral Forever?

For a time in the early 70s up until the mid-80s we prided ourselves as being ‘neutralist’ and very much non-aligned in our international diplomacy. We took a middle road in the Cold War and stood strong in the Group of 77. While this may be beneficial in multilateral fora such as at the United Nations, it has the downside of putting us in the corner whenever we are

participating in international seminars and workshops. There were many-a-times when we were asked to state our positions on issues and not being very clear about which was which, we were always at a disadvantage to explain why we had to keep to our side of the fence. At one time we were altogether a member of the Commonwealth, the Non-Aligned Movement, ASEAN, and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). It was not until Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad had become the Prime Minister from 1981 onwards that we began to be interested in thinking about our foreign relations with other countries in terms of inner and outer circles with ASEAN, the OIC and the Commonwealth and the others in that order. (Camroux, 1994)

For a good while however, we were regarded as ‘neutrals’ not wishing to side with any country or countries belonging to the Western or Eastern blocs. We would like to remain neutral and thus moved to position ourselves as non-aligned. We were happy that we had done so. But we could not easily wipe out the traces of history. Our attachment to our colonial past made us look a little bit out of place in most international gatherings. I recalled how awkward it was for me to be voting for a modified British resolution at one moment while abstaining on another one introduced by Pakistan, at an International Conference in Vienna, Austria sometime in the 80s. We were then regarded as a ‘neutral state’. I guessed this was what Nicolson had meant ‘by being diplomatic’. Sometimes we would just have to live with this reality.

Being Diplomatic – is it enough?

In how many ways can one be ‘diplomatic’? One can commit a faux-pas or two of course but all too often being just diplomatic can get on our nerves too. We would also need to execute into an extreme art form the various thrusts and parry of the smart conversationalist, the knowledgeable geographer, and the versatility of a seasoned ‘traveller’, and a ‘playing hard-to-get’ purveyor of much-needed information. To add to all these, we are also expected to be au fait with what is the latest from home. This last is the most difficult part of our job – how to keep connected with our home capital in the days when the Internet was not yet in full swing. Then again there is the constant headaches of feeding the Ministry with current developments in the host country. For this, what is needed is a good set of mental and physical calisthenics much

like the bloggers of today. It takes a lot of creative juices to fill up the many pages of our so-called Reports. There are the frequent outpourings of the substance of high dramas as well as the narrations of desperate peoples caught in the 'crossfires' of other peoples' fights. On top of that, there is our motto: as diplomats we are expected to always remain 'diplomatic'.

I tried to remember what some of the Ambassadors that I had worked with, had said on what it was like to be a good diplomat and 'being diplomatic'. Very early on Tan Sri Razali Ismail, considered as our most prominent Representative at the United Nations, had remarked to me,

"Don't give me the nitty-gritty. Go for the big picture".

Talking about what is the nature of the diplomat's job, (the late) Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong told a group of us once, that as diplomats we must worry about the day-to-day things, the events, the people involved, and the current situation in the reporting country. We do not have time for the long-term perspective for the country or countries involved. He was asking us to be concerned more with ad-hoc reporting rather than with lengthy and erudite thought pieces. From (the late) Tan Sri Zain Azraai I heard him say at one of our one-to-one meetings that,

"If there is a good story to tell we must tell that to our people"

Reporting Home

While at post we will always want to be the first to alert the Ministry about current developments in the various capitals we are in. Compared to the present-day trappings of Internet communications that have really revolutionised the way we are able to reach home within seconds, the situation in the early days of my diplomatic career was far from being complete. We were provided with only the minimal telephone lines during times of crisis. We could only rely on our good judgement and sheer ingenuity to get us through the difficult task of reporting back home.

When I was serving in Bangladesh, I needed to send an urgent message to the Ministry giving details about the military coup that had happened then. I was offered help to have our messages sent to Kuala Lumpur via the Swiss

Foreign Ministry in Berne, Switzerland. What a relief!

In Phnom Penh, Cambodia the story was different. There I was caught when the Embassy did not have any communication devices installed at that time. We had just set up a diplomatic mission there. I had to 'borrow' the International Telegraphic Codebook from the British Embassy there and I was able to send a coded message to the Ministry relating the incidents that had taken place in the war-torn capital.

Advice on Diplomatic Reporting

What advice for the young? Much would depend on your language skills and personal preferences. A good advice to heed is to avoid pedantics and rhetorics. (The late) Tan Sri Zain Azraai, whom I was with in Washington DC, said we should go for the *Readers Digest* style.

Tan Sri Razali Ismail added on another occasion, why he had to reject a draft of a report submitted to him for approval,

"This is the English of a secondary school student".

"This is too classical. 'Macaulay-ish', 'Shakespearian' and 'Trivial'"

We were advised to follow the style opted by (the late) Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong, to make them 'crispy and precise', yet 'meaty'.

Designs at Grand Diplomacy

In the realm of Grand Diplomacy, I wanted to share two episodes that have remained indelible in my memory. I believe that from time to time we need to recall some of these that for the love of King and Country, as the country's frontliners and the 'first line of defence', diplomats must have a sense of grandeur and passion at their tasks.

It was related to me that when (the late) Dato' Ismail Ambia, our former Ambassador to Cambodia, was trying to convince his Indonesian colleague of the need to persuade the warring factions in Cambodia to come to the negotiation table, he appealed to his Indonesian colleague to refer to the Indonesian sense of history and their implicit interest in trying to take the

lead in regional affairs then. To win their support Dato' Ismail Ambia had to cite a passage from the Hindu Classic, the *Mahabharata*, that informs the Indonesian psyche until these days. This was a reference to when Rama had to send Hanuman to save Sita from the demons. It was known then, Indonesia had shown the way even in recent history in putting extra efforts at achieving regional cohesion and unity. Appealing then based on this same spirit and values the Ambassador had asked his Indonesian colleague at that instance of time and place to do so, once again in the name of regional cooperation.

I also wish to record for posterity the meaningful intervention at grand diplomacy by (the late) Tan Sri Khatib Hamid who had spent some time in Indonesia as Malaysian Ambassador. In an attempt to convince the Indonesians to join in a regional exercise in unity-building, he had wisely introduced with dramatic effects and positive results at a regional Conference in Jakarta, the ubiquitous *pantun* (the Malay poetic quatrains/couplets that had enriched Malay literature throughout the ages) and something that was evocative of the '*serumpun*' ethos that has been at the core of relations between Malaysia and Indonesia:

*"Kalau roboh kotanya Melaka
Papan diJawa kita dirikan
Kalau betul bagai dikata
Badan dan nyawa kita berikan"*

The *pantun* carries the meaning that if anything were to happen to the good relations between the two countries such that if one were to fall the other would come to the aid of the other with body and soul. Such were the intensity of our designs at grand diplomacy in those days.

Dr. Azhari-Karim is a diplomat for Malaysia from 1970 to 1994 with service as Ambassador to Iran in 1990 and Ambassador to Spain in 1992. His forthcoming publications are The Working of Malaysian Foreign Policy and The United States and the World.

Live and Let Live – A Symphony of Life in Abuja

Gloria Tiwet

This is my story. A distinctive insight into my life and my work as a Malaysian diplomat at the High Commission of Malaysia at Abuja (Mission Abuja), aimed at inspiring the officers and staff of the Ministry. “*Live and Let Live – do not judge, take life as it comes and deal with it, everything will be okay*” is a quote by James Frey in his book *A Million Little Pieces*, and aptly describes my experience in this article.

My fourth – and my first ambassadorial – posting brought my husband and I to Abuja, Nigeria. We made the 26-hour travel from Kuching International Airport and landed at the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja on Wednesday, 4 April 2018.

One may have asked or wondered why I accepted this posting. It was an outright “yes”. There were no qualms, and no ifs or buts. To me, service to the nation is paramount. Our life and death are in God’s hand. We must always ensure our and our loved one’s safety and good health. The rest, we pray and have faith in God that all will be fine.

The reality is that the nature of work is the same, irrespective of which mission I am posted to. The fine line lies in the ability to adapt to the country, in all aspects of its people, culture, and government. It is best to quickly adapt to the country, so work can commence smoothly. I prepared the “To-do list” ever mindful of the Ministry’s “evergreen” advice of “to be heard and to be seen”. There is the Head of Mission Key Performance Index that needed to be achieved successfully, annually. This kept me and Mission Abuja active to provide effective work performance and services at all times. The aim is to further strengthen the bilateral relations between Malaysia and Nigeria,

established since 1965, at all levels of government to government, business to business, and people to people relations.

Mission Abuja is similar to other Malaysian missions of a three-man formation, comprising Head of Mission, Head of Chancery and Third Secretary. Additionally, we have a Trade Commissioner in Lagos. Initially Mission Abuja was in Lagos but in August 2006, it was relocated to Abuja, the new capital city of Nigeria.

A diplomat's nature of work is diplomacy. It is a skill both acquired and innate which needs to be maximised in order to achieve successful result. Upon arriving at post, I actively engaged with fellow Heads of Mission (HOMs), diplomats and Nigerian Government officials through various activities and functions including recreational activities. Continuous and close communications with other HOMs in these modern days, especially via WhatsApp and other platform of communications are crucial. The HOMs' WhatsApp group hosted by the High Commissioner of Cameroon, the Dean of Diplomatic Corps, is our daily communication tool. I initiated the informal grouping of lady HOMs in Abuja and we actively engage with each other via a "Zoom" meeting every Friday morning. There are currently eight lady HOMs comprising Benin, Cuba, Germany, Malaysia, the Philippines, Poland, United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

I actively participated in the ASEAN Committee in Abuja (ACA) and was chairman in 2018. The ACA comprises the Mission of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Constant and active engagements with Nigeria's business community and states in Nigeria are important, particularly through good cooperation between the Chancery and the Trade Commission in Lagos. A remarkable increase in the total value of bilateral trade in 2020 for Malaysia and Nigeria by 17.33 per cent at USD845.6 million (RM3.55 billion) from USD669.1 million (RM2.9 billion) in 2019, is a testament of our efforts.

On 18 March 2020, Nigeria joined other countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Mission Abuja successfully assisted and co-organised two repatriations, on 22 June 2020 involving 27 Malaysians, and on 10 July 2020 involving 92 passengers, comprising 25 Malaysians and other

nationalities. Those were days of constant communications and negotiations with all the relevant agencies and foreign missions for assistance. Malaysians who were affected were cooperative in and supportive of all efforts made by Mission Abuja. We continued to communicate closely and provide consular assistance to Malaysians in the country and in six accredited countries: Benin, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon.

Work is as usual at Mission Abuja and we embrace the new normal and adhere to the Standard Operating Procedure during the COVID-19 pandemic. We live and let live, embracing Abuja as our home and work location.

Nigeria in Brief

President Muhammadu Buhari won the presidential election in 2019 and is currently in his second term in office. Nigeria is a federal republic with a three-tier government at federal (central), state and local governments. It has 36 states under the rule of governors as heads of states, alongside influential traditional rulers comprising Sultans and Emirs in Northern Nigeria, village chiefs in Eastern Nigeria (Igwe, Eze), Western Nigeria (Obas, Ooni, Aalafin) and Southern Nigeria (Olu, Obas, Obong).

Nigeria is situated in western Africa with a total land area of 923,768 sq. kilometres. It is the most populous country in Africa and boasts much economic strength in the region. Nigeria has an estimated population of 211 million people (United Nations – World Population Prospects), with populace professing a balance of Muslim and Christian religion. Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product in 2021 is at USD466.88 billion and main exports are oil and gas, cashew, cocoa oil seeds, raw hide, and leather. Inflation is an issue that continuously affects the country. In January 2021, the inflation rate was at 18 per cent. This led to the increase in the prices of goods and services and high standard of living. Nigeria boasts 60 per cent of the population of young workforce aged 18 to 45 but the reality is, they are most hit during the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, an estimated 30 per cent of Nigeria's population are unemployed, while approximately 60 per cent are on daily wages.

Security challenges remain infectious and deadly in Nigeria. In 2021,

security challenges were rife with threats of Boko Haram in the northern part of Nigeria and a widespread of other threats of kidnapping for ransom, banditry, cultism, and sporadic killings within the country. The Nigerian Government under President Buhari continues to take active actions to overcome these challenges in order to achieve peace and security in the country. At the point of writing, actions are proving arduous.

Incidences of protest are also not a distant sight. My maiden experience of the protest happened on 12 April 2018 when the Shiites group protested on the streets of Abuja as I was on my way to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to present copies of my Letter of Credence. It was both a shocking and scary experience for me as people in huge numbers marched past our vehicle, shouting, and demanding the release of their leader, Ibrahim El-Zakzaky. It was an experience that I do not wish to face again. Throughout the three years I have been at post, many other protests and demonstrations have taken place in various parts of the country such as demand for salary payment by teachers, police, and doctors; protests during the election period of October 2018 to March 2019, and the END SARS protests in October 2020.

The END SARS protests was very intense, and it affected us directly. Sounds of thundering bangs and snippets of shootings may be a distance away, yet sounded as though they were right at our doorstep. We quickly made our way home, while continuously praying for our safety, the safety of our family members and the safety of our staff. Through the intense period of two weeks, we remained vigilant, commuting only to work, and keeping safe at our respective residences. The thought of being caught in a line of fire is one that is difficult to comprehend. Even though a diplomat's prowess is in negotiation, there is no amount of "negotiation" when a stray bullet is coming towards you. The wisest action is to avoid the location of protests altogether.

Quality services for workmanship and repairs are much sought after. Toilet flush malfunctions, and regular and frequent electricity failures are just two examples from the extensive list endured thus far. After fixing the broken toilet flush, a few weeks later another malfunction is sure to happen. This may be water leaking from the toilet flush or no water supply at all. Electricity supply disruption is a daily affair, at least five times a day. Electricity top-

up in kilowatt (kW) are bought from the Nigeria Energy Power Authority and the use of a generator is ideally for backup. A normal life in Abuja is, in fact, a constant use of both electricity supply from the top-up kW and the generator, which proves to be increasingly costly. It is indeed disheartening when an electricity blackout, topped by a sudden generator malfunction, in the middle of a function left us and our guests in the dark.

Nigerians communicate in a unique mind-boggling way. “Exercise patience” is commonly uttered, yet this saying does not hold true when one has been waiting for months and actions are still being taken. Indeed, patience is a must for diplomats at post in Nigeria. Nigerians in general are friendly, respectful, and hardworking, the utterance of “Anything for me Sir/Ma” (Ma is short for Madame, a respectful way to address a female) are commonly used, simply requesting a token or a tip for work performed, or at times by those on the streets seeking monetary contributions.

We may all be familiar with the saying “on the way”. Indeed, we anticipate the person to be delayed and to really be on the way. In Nigeria, one need not be surprised if the person comes late by one hour or more, considering that most times they would still be at home getting ready.

For diplomats who enjoy singing and dancing, Nigeria is the right place to be. People are readily singing and dancing at the sound of music, hence, bringing much joy and liveliness to functions, including at Mission Abuja.

Abuja’s weather during the season of *harmattan* from October to April, with temperatures soaring up to 45°C, is really challenging. Dry, itchy skin coupled with other health issues such as asthma and dehydration are common. We are fortunate to have quality medical services provided at private hospitals and clinics in ensuring our good health. On a positive note, it is also the fruit season for fresh, juicy, and sweet mangoes, oranges, pineapples, watermelon, and avocado, just to name a few.

Food is aplenty in Nigeria, both in terms of supply and variety. Imported food items, including some Malaysian products are also available. Others are local produce such as vegetables, fruits, and livestock.

One unique living condition at post is the use of a borehole as a source of water supply. However, as the water is not treated, we refrain from consuming it and using it for cooking. Mineral water in tubs and bottles continue to be our saviour.

In conclusion, the posting at Mission Abuja is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for both my husband and I. The esprit de corps among the home-based staff (HBS) and the locally recruited staff, including the active participation of spouses of the HBS, contribute to a meaningful living and working environment. All challenges faced can be overwhelming, but they make us stronger. *“Live and Let Live – A symphony of life in Abuja’, is my story, my song, etched for a life-long.*

Ambassador Gloria Tiwet hails from Kuching, Sarawak. She joined the Administrative and Diplomatic Service on 16 December 1996. She has been assigned to various posts at the Ministry including Malaysia’s missions abroad in Chile, Argentina, Sweden and currently in Nigeria.

Romania – Short Impression

Halimah Abdullah

My post as an Ambassador in Romania had encompassed a total of five and a half years, the longest of the six postings I had. Looking back, my time there was filled with memories of happiness, sadness, hardship, and challenges. But by far, it was one of the most interesting experiences of my life.

The Romanians always had a good view of Malaysia. I always like asking the people I met what they knew about my country. Very often the person I asked would think for a second, glow, and answer one or all of the following: The famous Sepang Formula One racetrack, the Petronas Twin Tower building, and finally, in a musical tone “Malaysia, Truly Asia”. Their answers will always leave me with a smile. Even though the answers were very common knowledge to many people, what made a difference to me was how our conversations followed after. It would always be welcoming, full of heart, curiosity and joy.

Even though most had not visited Malaysia, there were some who had, and when asked about their experience, would always exclaim that they were fascinated by the level of developments they had seen. They were impressed by our culture and technology. They loved our food, especially *teh tarik* and *nasi lemak*. Some even visited the country more than once to enjoy what we have to offer. But that feeling was very much mutual, as I was impressed at the enthusiasm and positivity they had for Malaysia.

During my posting, we organised many activities and saw progress in the promotional efforts on Malaysia. As the years passed, more exchanges of high and middle level visits took place. We hosted food fairs, cultural performances, trade and investment seminars, fashion shows, and cultural

exhibitions to promote what Malaysia had to offer. Each of these events would always be received with much welcomed positivity and genuine interest. I would always remember those events for the good cooperation and assistance that I received. I can safely say that working with the Romanians, we had the same spirit. There was always a yearning for collaboration that was respectful and understanding. It was only in time that these positive feelings would pass over into my personal life there.

Perhaps, it would be interesting if I could elaborate on my personal experience in the country. It is a rule of thumb that when you are stationed in another country, local friends are indispensable. Ask any diplomat in the service, and they will always explain that having local friends are always good as they could help you and get you used to your new surroundings. But for me, the friends that I had made there were such open, supportive, and caring people that they did not just get me used to the country, but rather, they made the country grow on me. There were differences in our cultures, but I would always remember the exuberant and, at times, vibrant and energetic conversations we had, exchanging anecdotes and facts of both sides. Some of these conversations even extended into late nights. Differences aside, I was always greeted with open arms by these new friends, who were eager to show me what their lives were like.

I learned how important Easter Day was for them, and the strict and meticulous preparations they carried to honour it. Houses were cleaned and food was beautifully prepared to perfection to welcome guests that came adorned with new clothes. I was also given the honour of making decorated eggs for the occasion. I jumped at the opportunity to paint eggs, smiling and enjoying the custom and practice. However, these eggs were not just for show. Guests and hosts would meet, and in tradition, they would knock their decorated eggs with each other to signify the religious occasion. But not knowing how to do it properly, more often than not, my egg would be crushed.

During my service in Romania, I was also given the honour of celebrating Christmas, or “Craciun” in Romanian, with local families in their hometown. I was welcomed with open arms into their homes, and instantly sat in front of a table lined with Romanian delicacies. Amongst them was the *sarmale*,

a mixture of minced meat carefully wrapped with grape leaves and slowly cooked in a stew. This was indispensable to any festive gathering and having one without it would be close to a disaster. Served on the side in traditional bowls was a mixture of pickled home-grown vegetables and polenta or *mamaliga*. This, of course, would also be served with soups and stews made specific from their grandmother's recipe. As you might imagine, it was both a pleasure to eat, and an exercise for my stomach to keep. But finally, I was introduced to a dessert which has now made its way into my list of favourite sweets. It is called *papanasi*, a sort of doughnut served generously with fruit syrup and sour cream. *Papanasi* had such a profound effect on my taste buds that it became my regular after meal dessert. To my convenience, one such recipe that I liked the most is the one served at the restaurant in Marshall Hotel in the centre of the city, which I regularly patronised.

Bucharest is a city that is vibrant with the bustle of a metropolis. Although its surface of post-communist buildings and traffic-jammed streets may leave an impression of chaos, it has a beautiful cultural side that I love. Every opportunity I had, I would frequent the National Opera and enjoy orchestras playing classical music perfectly, and opera performances. This was a perfect escape for the winter seasons, the time when the National Opera usually staged their events. I found in myself an enthusiasm and a love for the arts and appreciated the opportunity when I was able to experience them.

However, deep at its core, all these experiences showed me what true friends meant. Here, in a country with a different language, custom, and culture, I truly valued what friendship meant. It meant understanding and caring for one another, regardless of race, language, and background. It meant spending and creating new memories, ones that I would always remember. It meant helping each other in times of difficulty. In Romania, I shared a time of sadness with one of my closest friends, as his beloved wife passed away due to cancer. There I witnessed the closeness of friendship and family, and the tradition of care and support which was the way of life in Romania. It was a time of sorrow and grief, but we were supportive and always there when we needed to be.

It was not very long after that I was also untimely visited by a moment of hardship. Sometime in the last half of my tour, I fell very ill. I had just

completed a much-needed surgery in Vienna, Austria, and was undergoing a few months of recuperation. However, due to complications, my health began to deteriorate. It was a very difficult time, as I visited doctors from hospital to hospital to receive the correct diagnosis and treatments. Unfortunately, the medical conditions in Romania were not able to relieve me of my health issues, and when I was forced to visit Austria again, I was wheeled into the airport on a wheelchair, and carried onto the plane. I was very lucky to have received adequate treatment in Vienna, and my health improved tremendously in such a short span of time that I was able to healthily jump back onto a plane for Romania. I am regretful that Romania was not able to help me with my health issues, and I was put in a very difficult and potentially tragic situation. But those times were aided and brightened by the close Romanian friends I had made. They stuck with me through thick and thin, and were always supportive. They contacted everyone they knew to help me get back my health. It was there that I knew the true meaning of friendship; those who support and give everything they have to help you.

In those five and a half years, I had travelled from north to south and east to west of Romania. I had eaten their food and sang their songs. I had found a hotel that served the best *papanasi* and sat in a jubilant crowd of opera goers. I had conversed long into the night about different cultures and stayed next to a friend consoling him of a tragic passing. I had done all these, but it would have been nothing without the people I have met. There in Romania are the people I would never forget.

Perak-born Datin Paduka Halimah Abdullah served as Malaysia's Ambassador to Romania (2005 -2011) and to Italy (2011-2015). She also served in Malaysian embassies in Belgium, People's Republic of China, Australia and Thailand. After retiring from service in 2015, she is presently with the Italy-Malaysia Business Association/IMBA as Vice President.

Mi Casa Es Tu Casa

Jamaiyah M. Yusof

When the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed me that my next posting was to Mexico, my initial reaction was mixed. The fact that Mexico has one of the highest crime rates in the world really scared me. I was very much influenced by the negative coverage on CNN. I then shared the news of my new assignment and my concerns with my family. To my surprise, their reaction was quite positive. They said, “Mexico is a wonderful country with rich history, unique culture, great food, many interesting places to see and home to many Meso American civilisation such as the Olmec, Toltec, Teotihuacan, Aztec and Mayan.”

The impression I had of Mexico before I went there was that it was a land of drug dealers and kidnappers. Upon reflection, I realised that it was unfair to judge a country based on negative portrayal by the media and movies. I should take this assignment and see it myself. There is always more than just one side to a story.

Arriving in Mexico

On 8 May 2011, I landed at the Benito Juarez International Airport in Mexico City after a very long 25-hour flight. As has been the practice, I was received by the home-based staff of the Malaysian Embassy. Also at the airport were the ASEAN ambassadors from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam to greet me. At the time, I thought to myself that if the Mexicans were not friendly, at least I have my ASEAN friends.

However, I did not have to worry about Mexicans being unfriendly. Later in my stay, I discovered that the Mexicans are indeed very friendly people, and they made my four-year stay in Mexico interesting and memorable.

Early Days in Mexico

In the second week of my arrival, I moved into the newly rented Ambassador's Residence located at Francisco de Croix, Lomas Virreyes, about a ten-minute drive from the Embassy. The residence was surrounded by high walls with a spacious compound. I noticed that all the houses there have high walls of up to twelve feet equipped with CCTV and electric wires, and almost all have security guards. Due to the high walls, you cannot see how the houses inside look like. It looked like a prison from the outside, albeit beautiful looking prisons.

Looking at the security features put in place, you know that security is an issue, even though it is an affluent enclave. It was not an encouraging sign.

Getting to Know Places

Before I arrived in Mexico, I made a list of famous and interesting places to visit. The first place I wanted to see was the Teotihuacan, a famous archaeological site of the Toltec empire, situated 50 kilometres from Mexico City. During my courtesy call on Ambassador Lozoya, the Mexican Ambassador to Malaysia then, he advised me not to do strenuous activities in my first week in Mexico City as the city is about 7000 feet above sea level, and the low oxygen level can be fatal to newcomers. I ended up going to Teotihuacan during my first week there and climbed the Pyramid of the Sun, which is about 65 metres high. Thankfully, I was able to reach the top without any problems and watched the breath-taking view of the Avenue of the Dead, in between the Pyramid of the Moon and Ciudadela.

Looking back, it was rather scary, considering that two Resident Ambassadors passed away in Mexico City due to shortness of breath. The first was an Indonesian Ambassador who collapsed while playing football and the second was the Cypriot Ambassador who died a few days after arriving in Mexico. Learning from this, the Ministry should consider sending only healthy and fit diplomats to serve in Mexico.

My next destination was Acapulco, a beach resort located about a two-and-a-half hours' drive from Mexico City. It was the first city I visited outside of Mexico City. I was not disappointed as the city was blessed with beautiful sandy beaches and many popular attractions. Acapulco was famous in

the 1960s as a gateway for Hollywood stars and millionaires. Among the most popular attraction is the La Quebrada where divers entertain tourists by jumping off either one of the two ledges on the cliff – 40 and 80 feet high respectively. It was quite scary to watch but the divers were seasoned professionals and put on an exciting show.

Due to the upsurge in gang violence, Acapulco no longer attracts many foreign tourists, but remains a favourite vacation spot for Jennifer Lopez, who goes there every summer.

Presentation of Credential

I finally received the notification from the Ministry of Foreign Relations to present my Letter of Credence to H.E President Felipe Calderon, President of the United States of Mexico on 14 August 2011. Our group was large, comprising twelve ambassadors and I was the only lady ambassador.

The ceremony was held at Los Pinos, the Official Residence of the President. All ambassadors were required to assemble at Campo Marte, an equestrian complex in Mexico City. From there, we were taken to the Official Residence. Upon arrival, we had a group photo and afterwards, we were escorted to a waiting room. My turn was number six. Each ambassador was given 20 minutes to spend with the President.

During the brief meeting, I presented the Letter of Credence and conveyed the warm wishes from His Majesty the (then) King, Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin. We also briefly touched on several bilateral issues between Malaysia and Mexico.

I was then escorted to a meeting with the press, comprising 20 journalists. After the *Negaraku* was played, I briefed the press on my meeting with the President, followed by a Question-and-Answer session. They asked me on the outcome of the meeting and the issues discussed with the President. However, a journalist from the *Reforma* newspaper asked me about the case of the Three Mexican Brothers: Simon, Luis Alfonso, and José Regino González Villarreal who were imprisoned in Malaysia and were given the death penalty for drug offences. The case was of concern to the Mexican human rights group because Mexico was against the death penalty. *Reforma*

had sent reporters to Malaysia to cover the trial. Replying to his questions, I told him that the issue was not discussed and that since the crime happened in Malaysia, the brothers were trialled in a Malaysian court, and therefore, should serve their sentences according to Malaysian law.

Under the government of President Calderon, Mexico's position was to respect the Malaysian court's decision. However, under his successor, President Pena Nieto, Mexico wanted the brothers to be spared from the gallows and sent back to Mexico. According to reliable sources, the Villareal family sought President Pena Nieto's help with the case. After I left Mexico, I read in the Malaysian newspaper that the King had pardoned the brothers and they were sent back to Mexico. The Mexican Ambassador in Malaysia must have been working very hard to get them back to Mexico and to fulfil the promise of the President to the Villareal family.

Invitation by State Governors and Mayors

Mexico is made up of 31 states and many cities. They are free to organise their own events or festivals using their own budget. They will always invite foreign diplomats to attend such events.

The first invitation I received was from the Governor of Oaxaca, who hosted the Guelaguetza Festival, a cultural celebration where representatives from the 16 different ethnolinguistic groups celebrate their diverse traditions and cultures. Each costume and dance have a local, indigenous, historical, and cultural meaning. I was thrilled and entertained by the beautiful performances. It was indeed an eye-opener for someone who had just arrived in Mexico.

Every year, the city of San Miguel de Allende organises the 'El Encuentro Internacional de Convivencia' (International Encounter for Coexistence). Under this event, the mayor invites several volunteers in the city to host one Resident Ambassador. The mayor will assign one ambassador to a host and the host will be introduced to the ambassador in a ceremony at the town hall. The host family will then accompany the ambassador to participate in a parade representing the ambassador's country followed by a musical concert organised by the mayor. The final programme for the day will be a private dinner arranged by the host.

My host, Laura and her brother, Jose, were very warm and amiable. They were not familiar with Malaysia but showed interest to know more about Malaysia. Our first meeting went so well, so we decided to meet again. Laura and Jose live on a ranch about three kilometres from the city and invited me to stay there during the weekends. On my part, I invited them to attend events organised by the Embassy.

The first event they attended was the Malaysian National Day reception. I was so happy to see the whole family present. I acknowledged them in my speech and referred to them as my Mexican family. After that day, we grew closer and I accepted their invitation to visit their ranch. It was my first visit to a ranch, which I enjoyed very much. From then on, whenever there was a long weekend, I would go to the ranch and experience ranch life while enjoying delicious Mexican dishes.

For me, this is a unique and special experience – to have a Mexican foster family. I felt blessed to have met them. Soon, I became the envy of my colleagues who wished to have a foster family like me. Until today, I am still in contact with Laura and Jose. They also came to Malaysia to attend my son's wedding.

Annual Trips Organised by the Ministry of Foreign Relations

Every year, the Ministry of Foreign Relations organises a trip for ambassadors to visit a different state. The Ministry, together with the state, will host an interesting programme for the ambassadors. During one of the trips, we flew in the president's official jet, which was a special experience for me.

During these trips, we would be briefed on the state's economic development and opportunities and taken to touristic sites to enjoy cultural performances and popular cuisine from that region. The Ambassadors always look forward to the annual trip. It was an excellent opportunity to see beautiful places and a fun outing with colleagues away from Mexico City.

Trip to Guadalajara

In conjunction with a tourism conference, the Ministry of Tourism organised a trip to Guadalajara. As part of the programme, we visited an agave (pronounced as 'agavey') farm and a tequila factory. Upon arrival, we

were received by lovely Mexican girls in beautiful traditional costumes. The Mariachi band welcomed us and sang their songs. We were also entertained by elegant Mexican dancers in bright and colourful costumes.

At the farm, we were given a demonstration on how to plant and harvest the trunk which is later crushed at the factory to produce the juice to make tequila. We were then given the opportunity to harvest the agave and later taken on a tour of the tequila factory.

On this particular trip, we were accompanied by a group of officers from the Ministry of Tourism. We got along very well and promised to keep in touch. A month later, I invited them for lunch at the Residence. I felt honoured when the whole division, including the director, came for the lunch.

The University of Ixtlahuaca

A few weeks after my arrival, Dr. Margarito, the Director of the University of Ixtlahuaca, made a courtesy call on me. He wanted to have a collaboration between the university and the Embassy. He shared with me about the university's ongoing Exchange Student programme with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and the fact that the university is the state's dancing competition champion. I told him that I would like to form a dance group comprising Mexican students to perform the Malaysian dance at diplomatic events in Mexico City, and that the Embassy's home-based staff can teach the students. Dr. Margarito agreed immediately. A week later, the students were taught the *zapin* numbers and *joget wau bule*. Amazingly, they picked up the dance very fast and within a month, the group was already performing for the Embassy.

From then on, the Embassy engaged them to perform at all its functions, including four consecutive National Day receptions. The dancers love to do so because they receive exposure to perform for the diplomatic community in Mexico City. They were also invited to perform at the Senate, the Congress, and events organised by the Mayor of Mexico City, among others. We received a lot of praise and were envied by the other Embassies. I was really thankful to Dr. Margarito for his generosity and support in promoting the Malaysian culture in Mexico, which has helped Malaysia and the Malaysian Embassy to be held in high esteem. Since we were not able to get the

requested budget allocation, the Embassy, with the help of PERWAKILAN Mexico City, raised the money to pay for the costumes and token allowances for the dancers for each event.

At Dr. Margarito's invitation, I visited the University of Ixtlahuaca. Upon arrival, my two officers and I were received by the students who were waiting in line at the entrance. A student fair was organised for the purpose of our visit. The culinary students prepared various kinds of Mexican food for us, and we were entertained by the student performances and the university band. I was so touched by their warm hospitality, and I have no words to describe how nice and kind Dr. Margarito was.

Friendship with Dr. Hector from Leon, Guanajuato

Dr. Hector was a recipient of our Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP) under the Ministry of Health. At my invitation, Dr. Hector attended a lunch hosted for MTCP recipients at the Residence. He invited me to Guanajuato and when I made an official trip there, he offered to take me around the beautiful heritage city. While we were touring the city, his mother called, and he told her that he was showing the Malaysian Ambassador the city. His mother invited me to their house, and I accepted the invitation.

When we arrived, the whole family was waiting for me. Although we had never met, they were very gracious and friendly. They served delicious Mexican food which I enjoyed. They were interested to know about Malaysia and my job as an ambassador. Dr. Hector's mother was grateful that I accepted her invitation and presented me with a pair of homemade slippers and a cardigan which she knitted herself. I was really touched by her kind gesture. I still keep in touch with Dr. Hector and exchange warm wishes with his mother from time to time.

The Visit by Motorcycle World Endurance Ride

As part of their world endurance tour, four Malaysian bikers travelled to Latin America and one of their stops was Mexico City. The Embassy was notified in advance of their arrival in order to provide assistance. As part of the programme, they were invited to the Embassy and a press conference was arranged for them to meet with the Mexican press. I hosted a dinner,

and they came with four Mexican Facebook friends whom they met upon arrival in Mexico. The Mexicans were so helpful and generous to the bikers. They provided accommodation for them and helped to wash their clothes. They also took the bikers sightseeing and treated them at a famous Mexican restaurant.

According to the bikers, who had travelled around the world, the South Americans were the warmest, friendliest, and most generous people they have met. There were instances when the locals offered to pay for their meal when the bikers stopped in small towns. The bikers were amazed by their hospitality although they had just met.

In Mexico, they use the expression, “Mi casa es tu casa”. Literally, this translates to “my home is your home”. This conveys the message that anyone who wants to visit them will be welcomed with open arms, and the guests can feel so comfortable as if it was their own home. The bikers definitely experienced the true meaning of this expression.

Conclusion

Time flies. It was already 2015 and it was time for me to leave. My work at the Embassy, the official and personal trips I took, and the never-ending diplomatic events as well as the activities with the locals really made the four years feel very short. I did not even have time to think about the high crime rate and the drug cartel, which was my main concern before I arrived in Mexico. As advised by my Mexican friends, if you do not want to be a target, do not wear flashy expensive watches and jewellery, stay in crowded areas, and avoid dark and lonely streets. One Head of Mission was kidnapped with a few others while jogging in a secluded park. Fortunately for him, he managed to escape. The next day, he issued a Third Person Note, sent to all embassies to share his traumatic experience and to remind other diplomats to be careful.

Crimes aside, Mexico has many things to offer. It is a beautiful country, rich in culture and tradition, and is well known for its delicious food. Most importantly, the Mexicans are friendly and hospitable people as the famous Mexican saying goes ‘Mi casa es tu casa’.

Dato' Jamaiyah Mohamed Yusof was the Malaysian ambassador to Mexico and Senegal. She also served in France and Brazil. She was also the Director of Training at IDFR. Currently, Dato' Jamaiyah is an Adjunct Professor at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

The Day Baghdad Was Bombed

Jojie Samuel

16 December 1998 will forever be etched in my mind. It was an ordinary night in Baghdad, just like any other night. This would be the day that changed the entire history of humanity of Iraq. It was also the day the embassy organised a Christmas party at a restaurant in Baghdad, more than a week before Christmas Day.

This was my first year in Iraq, having arrived in Baghdad in January 1998. I was previously posted to the High Commission of Malaysia in Ottawa, Canada for two and a half years. Not many officers had the desire to be posted to Iraq then and I could understand why. However, I thought it would be a useful and valuable experience for me to undergo a hardship post and experience life as a diplomat in Baghdad. Anyway, what better way than to experience “adventure” in the land where Prophet Abraham was originally from.

Iraq was then under a near total financial and trade embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council. The country became subject to sanctions on 6 August 1990, four days after its invasion of neighbouring Kuwait. UN Security Council Resolution 661, later complemented by Resolution 687 in April 1991, imposed a series of sanctions on Iraq which include restrictions on free trade, financial dealings, weapons sales, flights and various imports. It also include an inspection system designed to prevent Iraq from obtaining and maintaining ballistic missiles and nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Most of these sanctions (often criticised for having hurt the population at large more than the regime) were lifted in 2003, after the toppling of Saddam Hussein.

So back to our Christmas party on what would end up as a dreadful and terrifying day. The celebrations ended around 11.00 p.m. My wife was with me and we were driving back to my residence when I thought of dropping by at a petrol station. To my surprise the petrol station was crowded with people, mostly Iraqis, who were there to fill up their cars. I wondered to myself why there were so many cars at that hour.

The previous months had seen a mounting crisis in relations between the UN weapons inspections body, UNSCOM, and the Iraqi regime. Iraq had obstructed weapons inspectors, denying them access to the so-called “presidential palaces” and refusing to cooperate.

I did not stay on for much longer as I sensed then that something terrible was going to happen. We reached my residence which is situated at the Al-Mansour district just before midnight. My two daughters, four and two years old then, were fast asleep. At around 12.30 a.m., on 17 December, the air-raid sirens screamed. I had never heard them before this and was already feeling nervous and worried. That was when it really hit me that we had to brace for bomb attacks on Baghdad. Frankly speaking, we were not ready for this. We were not expecting for Baghdad to be bombarded with missiles. But the most frightening part was thinking of the possibility that the bombs would also hit residential areas and innocent civilians like us.

Operation Desert Fox, as it was called, was ordered by the United States (U.S.) together with its close ally United Kingdom because of what U.S. President Clinton said of Iraq’s refusal to live up to its promise to allow the United Nations to conduct on-site inspections for weapons of mass destruction. The timing, he insisted, was a strategic decision based on a report delivered earlier by Richard Butler, Chairman of the United Nations Special Commission, overseeing the disarmament. The White House then ordered UNSCOM inspectors to withdraw from Iraq. What was to follow soon after that was totally unexpected although the U.S. administration knew exactly what would happen and what they needed to do.

The missile strikes began around 1 a.m. and lasted for four nights until 20 December. U.S. and British forces launched a fierce aerial attack on Iraq, sending waves of missiles and planes on deadly sorties. I switched on my

cable TV and watched in horror the devastating strikes as they hit Baghdad. I even daringly went up the roof (Arab houses were mostly flat) to see for myself the Tomahawk cruise missiles flying through the Baghdad skies. As the missiles fell, Iraqi anti-aircraft batteries opened up across the city. *The New York Times* article of 22 December 1998 by Stephen Kinzer clearly summed up the feeling, “Certainly there was an air of theatre about the streaking anti-aircraft fire that lit up the sky during the bombing raids. Most, if not all of it, came from low-caliber weapons that had no more chance of shooting down a jet fighter than a popgun would have. Its only purpose was to give Iraqis a sense that they were in some way masters of their destiny and not simply mute subjects.”

Series of deafening explosions echoed around the city, and the sky was lit up by tracer rounds and exploding shells. My house also shook from the explosions which were a mere five kilometres away. I knew then that this would be a sleepless night with loud explosions and frightening tremors keeping us all awake throughout the night.

They began to hit military and industrial targets in Iraq, mostly situated in Baghdad. It was later reported that there were intensive airstrikes involving 650 sorties against nearly 100 targets. A total of 415 cruise missiles were launched, including 325 Tomahawks fired by U.S. Navy forces and 90 heavier cruise missiles deployed from Air Force B-52s. Among the targets were suspected weapons plants, Iraqi intelligence agencies, a defence ministry building and fortifications of the military unit known as the Republican Guard.

The next day, when the bombings stopped, the embassy staff quickly gathered all Malaysians, including eight students, to immediately evacuate them to Amman, Jordan. The embassy already had a contingency evacuation plan and each of us knew our task. We knew this would be an arduous task as we had to transport our families and the students by land to Amman as no flights were allowed in or out of Baghdad then, due to the “no-fly zone” imposed on Iraq. The cost for the bus to ferry them was also exorbitantly high but we did not have any other option. Together with my wife, our daughters and the students in the bus were other family members of the home-based staff. We immediately contacted our colleagues at the Malaysian Embassy in

Amman to ask for assistance and to facilitate the necessary arrangements at the Iraq-Jordan border.

The journey to Amman took longer than anticipated due to problems at the border. Normally the drive from Baghdad to Amman, which is approximately 900 kilometres, would take around 10 to 11 hours. However, it took them more than 18 hours to reach Amman. Fortunately, our Malaysian embassy colleagues were at the border to help and ensure that everyone was allowed into Jordan. After one night at a hotel in Amman, they were all flown back to Kuala Lumpur using the Royal Jordanian Airlines plane. I was grateful that everyone was safe and no one was harmed. Back in Kuala Lumpur, my elder daughter had to be hospitalised for a few days due to dehydration and infection.

The rest of us – the ambassador, the ambassador’s personal assistant and I – stayed behind in Baghdad to “man the fort”. Around five Malaysian students made the decision to not be evacuated. They stayed with us and made themselves useful during the time when our families were not with us. Some of them helped with the cooking and cleaning.

After two days of bombings, I decided to drive around Baghdad and see for myself the devastation and the extent of the destruction caused by the missile attacks. I asked Waheed, one of the local staff who works with the embassy, to accompany me. I saw with my own eyes how the defence ministry building was completely damaged. Next to that building was Saddam’s Children’s Hospital, the largest maternity hospital in Baghdad. All the windows in the hospital were blown out by the force of the blast. I heard later that the doctors and the nurses were forced to evacuate all the patients in the middle of the attack. Waheed mentioned to me that some mothers spontaneously went into labour, and a few involuntarily aborted their pregnancies. Some babies in incubators died due to lack of oxygen as the electricity supply was cut off. Many people were in local hospitals with shrapnel wounds. No one knew how many people died. I even saw one missile land in the Karrada district, a business area of Baghdad, creating a big crater which later was filled with water from a burst water pipe.

The bombings lasted until 20 December, just a day before the beginning

of the Muslim fasting month of *Ramadan*. During this time, we worked from the home of one of the home-based staff as it was not safe to go to the embassy. Most times, we experienced electricity cuts and had difficulties in communicating with the Ministry back in Kuala Lumpur. It was extremely difficult as the bombings affected our work and daily life. We did not have internet back then, and only depended on the land lines for communication with the outside world. Even before the attacks, aside from the land lines, our only way of communicating with Kuala Lumpur was through the use of a cypher machine, the only reliable way of communication.

When Operation Desert Fox ended a mere 70 hours after it began, President Saddam Hussein remained firmly in power – minus some of his infrastructure – and the Iraqi dictator could claim to his people and to the world that once again, he had withstood an onslaught from the most powerful form of America's and the West's armed might – air power. While in general the city's daily life went on as normal, with the customary adjustments for the fasting required of Muslims during *Ramadan*, it was possible to glimpse heavy damage to several buildings where elements of the Iraqi security and military establishments were housed.

The Associated Press reported from Baghdad that President Saddam Hussein in a statement broadcasted in Iraq on 17 December, called on the Iraqi people to “fight the enemies of God, enemies of the nation and enemies of humanity. God will be only on our side and disgrace will be theirs, now and on the day of the judgement.”

The subsequent four months or so we stayed in Baghdad without our families. Our work and daily life went on as usual. *The New York Times* reported that “Iraq is a nation frozen in time”, and the American and British bombings seemed to have done nothing to bring the Iraqi regime down on their knees. The oddest thing about the bombing campaign, at least as viewed from Baghdad, is how little it changed anything. Life continued as if the explosions heard during the four days of bombing were nothing more than a fireworks show.

For my family and I, our stay in Baghdad will forever be etched in our memory. We still have fond memories of our time in Iraq, establishing

close relationships with the ordinary Iraqis. As for me, the bomb attacks in December 1998 was one of the most unforgettable experiences in my career as a diplomat. It taught me that life is so short and fragile.

Despite the difficulties and hardship experienced by the Iraqis, they remain hopeful that one day they would attain peace. Out of necessity, if for no other reason, the Iraqis seem to have accepted their fate. As they adjust to a new period of peace – at least for the time being – they continue to live in a world that for nearly a decade since 1990 has not progressed much, and in fact has slowly deteriorated.

Dato' Jojie Samuel, currently Ambassador of Malaysia to Thailand, served as First Secretary at the Embassy of Malaysia in Baghdad, Iraq from 1998 to 1999.

Malaysia's 'Islamic Diplomacy': A Novice Experience during the Iranian Revolution

Mohd Yusof Ahmad

It was a fine morning that day in September 1979. Looking out of the windows of the official car, I could not help but be mesmerized by the beauty of the clear blue Iranian skies and the warm rays of the autumn sun peeping through the tree-lined Pahlavi Avenue (now renamed "Valiasr"), Tehran's main boulevard. The scene evinced a sense of calm within. I distinctly remember the grand irony of the whole scenario – nature's beauty on offer juxtaposed against a society undergoing cathartic social, economic, political and revolutionary change following the Shah's overthrow by the revolutionary followers of Emam Khomeini in early 1979. The nagging question 'why' remained unanswered as Ahmad, the embassy driver, and I sped towards our official destination of the day – the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Little did I realise that my brief imagining was about to end with a rude shock.

The purpose of the visit to the Afghanistan mission in Tehran on that autumn day was to perform an established diplomatic ritual – that of signing the official condolence book as a token of last respect to the former President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Nur Muhammad Taraki, who had died a few days earlier in Kabul. In accordance with established diplomatic tradition, a condolence book was opened at the embassy for diplomats from friendly countries to pay their last respect to the former President by signing the condolence book.

I must confess that when officially notified of the subject, I was not exactly excited about the prospects of braving the still anarchic streets of

Tehran, where armed groups of revolutionaries, unidentified gunmen, ex-communists, former pro-Shah army regulars on the run, plain anarchists and armed criminals still roamed freely following the Shah's overthrow, to perform the diplomatic duty. However, given the fact that the Malaysian mission was without a head following the last ambassador's return to Kuala Lumpur after completing his term and that I was officially the charge d'affaires a.i., duty had to be done. As Malaysia is a friend of Afghanistan and a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, my visit there that morning was to fulfill this diplomatic obligation.

The Afghanistan mission was located in a very narrow street several kilometers away from the Malaysian Embassy on Avenue Bucharest. The Malaysian mission was a stone's throw away from the locations that witnessed, before the return of the Imam Khomeini to Iran in early 1979, daily scenes of bloody clashes between anti-Shah demonstrators and the Shah's feared military machine. I recalled that on my first day of work as a young inexperienced "greenhorn" on his first overseas posting at the mission in May 1978, I was in fact greeted by a stray bullet which fell onto the office carpet of my upstairs room through the open window. The experience was indeed unnerving. Since then, there followed numerous encounters with almost daily street demonstrations around the city until the final fall of the Shah in February 1979. The bullet, a fleeing soldier's bayonet and a limited-edition Swiss watch with the image of Imam Khomeini embossed on its face are still with me as personal mementos from that historic period.

Two streets away from the Afghanistan mission, our car passed through roads still strewn with signs of these earlier clashes. Crowds of people were milling around on both sides of the streets looking agitated and restless. Small groups of armed revolutionary guards or pasdaran stared menacingly at us as our DC-plated embassy car sped past these sad reminders of the revolution.

My earlier calm quickly dissipated as the embassy car turned a corner and eased into the last narrow street leading to the Afghanistan embassy. From about fifty feet away I could see a huge crowd of people mulling outside the Afghanistan mission. My heart almost stopped when I saw the crowd turned its attention towards our approaching car. I asked Ahmad, the driver,

to quickly lock all the car windows and slow the car down to avoid any provocative behavior. Within minutes the car was blocked and surrounded by the unruly mob. Some were carrying guns while others were shouting anti-American and pro-Khomeini slogans. All were angry looking. A few of them nearest to the car suddenly began thumping on the car doors, windows, hood and roof with their hands. Others began waving their guns in the air. A few stared and pointed at our small Malaysian car flag and began shouting "*Makbar America, Makbar America*" (Death to America, Death to America). One bearded man began to pull and scrutinize the car flag and shouted 'America, America' repeatedly. The rest followed the chanting, looking increasingly agitated. I could feel the heightened tension around us.

The person was joined by others as the knocking on the car windows became more insistent, demanding that these be lowered. The embassy driver, of Baha'i faith, turned pale and looked at me for further instruction. Equally nervous, I advised the driver to lower the window a bit and asked him to explain to the threatening crowd that I am a Muslim from Malaysia and definitely not an American. Ahmad's repeated attempts, however, failed. The crowd looked unconvinced. They continued to pull at the small flag, which unfortunately, does bear a strong resemblance to the American flag to anyone not familiar with it. After a few more minutes of heightened anxiety, which seemed like eternity, it suddenly occurred to me to try one more trick which I hoped would work.

Recollecting that Iran had been a regular winner at our yearly International Quran reading competition, I lowered the car window on my side, against the advice of Ahmad, and shouted repeatedly above the heads of the crowd "*Man ahle Malazie hastam, keshavare mizbane musabeghate jahanie gharaate Quran-e-karim*" (I am from Malaysia, host country of the International Quran Reading Competition). The impact was almost immediate and completely unexpected! Almost magic-like, the mention of those words immediately transformed the previously unruly mob into a smiling and friendly-looking crowd who cheered, patted the roof of the car and opened the way for the embassy car to proceed to its destination. Relieved, I thanked those within eye contact and asked Ahmad to proceed slowly to the Afghanistan embassy's front door where I was met by the Afghan charge d'affaires looking somewhat apologetic and embarrassed.

After fulfilling the necessary diplomatic ritual, Ahmad was waiting for me as I exited the front door of the embassy, albeit with some trepidation. However, to my surprise, the once hostile-looking crowd waved us past with lots of smile as we exited the narrow street into the main boulevard on the way back to our embassy. The experience became a favorite conversation topic among friends and colleagues at diplomatic gatherings for the next few days.

To be sure, for me personally, the unfortunate encounter had its moments of nervous apprehension, especially when the crowd turned menacing and mob-like. The night-mare vision of both Ahmad and I being pulled out of the car and manhandled by an armed mob-like crowd because of a mistaken identity did race through my head during those brief anxious moments. The fact that it did not happen, and that the incident eventually ended on a happy note was indeed a great relief. But if there is one positive lesson that I had learned from the whole episode, it was the feeling of pride that Malaysia's proactive role in promoting Islam at the national and international levels did gain valuable returns on its investment. In this particular case, Malaysia's 'Islamic diplomacy' did help to save the day for both Ahmad and I when it was most needed.

Dato' Dr. Mohd Yusof Ahmad served in various capacities at several Malaysian missions abroad, including as second secretary/charge d'affaires at the Malaysian Embassy in Tehran, Iran, from 1978 to 1980. He was Director General of IDFR from 2002 to 2004.

The Road Taken and a Baton to Pass

Syed Mohamad Hasrin Aidid

Preamble

The tension in the room was rising. Predominantly out of anticipation by almost everyone present, eager for a successful closure to our collective toiling and efforts of the preceding months. I looked around the crowded Trusteeship Council Chamber of the United Nations Headquarters. It was a gathering of delegates and representatives for the Third Preparatory Committee of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, back in April 2019.

Since its establishment in 1970, the NPT has had periodical Preparatory Committee Meetings and Review Conferences, to assess the implementation of the treaty and chart its future milestones. At the crux of the treaty is the goal of addressing the greatest and universal threat to humanity posed by nuclear weapons.

Serving as the Chair of the Third Preparatory Committee (Third NPT PrepCom) accorded me the prerogative of a seat at the podium, with a clear panoramic view of the chamber. However, the job came with a great responsibility, which was to facilitate discussions, dialogues, and consultations among the 191 NPT States Parties.

The two-week Third NPT PrepCom was not only filled with a lot of substantive deliberations. Through extensive consultations and careful stewardship, we also managed to address procedural hurdles that at times distracted the focus of delegations. Specifically, we secured an agreement among States Parties to put in place the necessary prospective endorsement for the President-designate of the Tenth NPT Review Conference, which

was supposed to be convened the following year.

By the final day of the meeting, I faced a major dilemma. Whether to proceed with an issuance of a summary by the Chair that captured what transpired during the two-week meeting, or to pursue the other option of not issuing any outcome document. The latter meant that delegations would return to their respective capitals with naught. No tangible substantive progress achieved for all their toil. If I were to present a Chair's Summary, it would surely trigger mixed reactions. The deliberations among NPT States Parties up to that point had clearly demonstrated tumultuous political undercurrents, which at times turned acrimonious.

I was well aware of certain delegations which disagreed with some of the elements contained in the draft Chair's Summary. As such, my issuance of a Chair's Summary would not go down easily. In disagreement, any delegation could respond to the Chair's Summary in the most acerbic manner.

The clock was ticking. I looked at the gavel given to me, admiring this little tool for its symbolic nature and decisive function in a multilateral deliberative process. As delegates eagerly scouted for clues of my next course of action, I let my mind wander and travel, in search of the necessary resolve.

Reflection

The shinkansen came to a complete stop. I checked my watch. The Japanese bullet train impressively arrived at our destination at the exact time it promised. At first glance, the city of Hiroshima seemed to exude an aura of great pride, not unlike the city of Nagasaki that I had toured the day before.

In my capacity as the Chair of the Third NPT PrepCom, I humbly accepted the invitation from the Government of Japan to visit both cities which had experienced the devastation of massive atomic bombings approximately 74 years ago. The visit was intended to demonstrate to the Chair, a few months ahead of the Third NPT PrepCom, the unthinkable destruction caused by nuclear weapons.

I initially thought that the visit to Japan would not bring anything new. After all, I had read and listened to testimonies of the hibakushas (Japanese

term to describe survivors of the 1945 atomic bombings). However, as I stepped into the exhibition hall of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, nothing prepared me for what I saw. I was not quite sure what triggered that somber mood in the whole exhibition area. Perhaps, it was the dim lighting or maybe the artistic set-up of the displays.

After a while, my own subdued emotion multiplied with the realisation that the massive atomic blasts were not only a dedicated chapter in history books. They were real human tragedies.

The blinding white explosions and big mushroom clouds. The massive energy from those bombs, consisting of heat rays, blasts and radiation. They left the surrounding humanity with either immediate casualties or permanent disabilities. Survivors had to endure pain and sorrow, both physical and psychological, throughout their ensuing lives. Even until today, there is an abundance of very moving and vivid narrations as shared and recorded by survivors of the atomic bombings, for those interested to delve deeper into the tragedy.

Scholars of history have offered various schools of thought on what had led to the atomic bombings in Japan, and how they had changed the course of international relations. If we were to turn back time, would humankind have been able to avoid the calamities that befell Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

This question is up for analyses and case studies. As I concluded the tour and made my way out of the exhibition hall, the official guide led me to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park just outside. It is customary for visiting guests to lay a wreath in honour and memory of the lives lost.

After the wreath-laying ceremony, I could not help but recite a *surah* from the Quran (*Al-Fatihah*) and prayed for the Muslim victims, including those from Malaysia.

That memorable tour of Hiroshima and Nagasaki left an indelible mark on me, up to this day. The past is history, which we cannot change. But the future awaits us to be chartered and lived. The catastrophic humanitarian consequences caused by atomic weapons, as demonstrated in both cities in

1945, should not befall any other city or any other country. The calamities were unthinkable inhumane for the humanity to endure again. In fact, we cannot begin to even imagine the hardship and difficulties suffered by those who lived in both cities, in that particular period of time. As shared by the hibakushas, the physical pain does not subside, and the trauma is not healed by time, even more than 70 years after the bombings.

I thought to myself, that at the very least, those who are directly involved in the deliberation of nuclear weapons disarmament and non-proliferation should visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to witness firsthand the kind of destruction and aftermath brought by atomic bombings.

The Path Forward

My personal recollection suddenly halted. A member of the UN Secretariat leaned in and whispered in my ear “What do you plan to do next, Mr. Chair?”

I looked around the Trusteeship Council Chamber. Faces of delegates were still gazing directly at me. My dilemma remained, on whether to proceed with the issuance of a Chair’s Summary or adjourn the meeting without producing any tangible outcome. To be on the safe side and not wanting to trigger any reactions from countries, I could simply adjourn the meeting. In other words, all delegations would be equally unhappy, a common eventuality in a complex multilateral negotiation. But somehow, I could not muster enough strength to just proceed in that direction. My conscience reminded me of the memorable trip to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the precious lessons it taught me.

That nuclear weapons possess infinite threats and destructive powers against any civilisation.

That nuclear weapons should no longer threaten our lives or that of our children and grandchildren.

And that the voice of the international community yearning for eternal peace in a world rid of nuclear weapons, once and for all, should be given its due recognition and well heeded.

All these perspectives rushed through my head, contextualised into a thought and converged towards a deep conviction. After all, I had to be guided by the wish of the States Parties, as conveyed during the meeting. My role as the Chair was as the facilitator of the process, without imposing my own country's position or personal preference.

Realising this indisputable fact, I gently responded to the Secretariat staff, "Please proceed with an issuance of the Chair's Summary". As expected, delegations particularly from the nuclear-weapon states who did not agree with certain elements contained in the Chair's Summary, such as those pertaining to nuclear weapons disarmament and non-proliferation, openly criticised my approach. The non-nuclear-weapon states, on the other hand, lauded the issuance of the Chair's Summary, which contained many important points including a principled stance against continued possession of nuclear weapons.

In hindsight, it is commendable that the NPT has been in existence for 51 years. The past few decades have witnessed great efforts to reduce the number of nuclear weapons towards their total elimination. Despite all that, the ultimate goal has yet to be attained. The issue is anything but easy, compounded by a long list of complicated factors. After all, the international geopolitical dynamics are not getting any simpler by the day.

It is hoped that my modest efforts in serving as the Chair of the Third NPT PrepCom, on behalf of Malaysia, contributed positively to the multilateral discourse towards establishing a world without nuclear weapons. While nuclear weapons might not be entirely abolished during my lifetime, it remains a sacred cause that needs to be continuously fought for. As depicted by the exhibitions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the threats of nuclear weapons are real, and humanity is at stake.

Sometimes, during my solitary moment, my mind is drawn back to the moments and experiences of the final hour of the Third NPT PrepCom. Back then, the arduous efforts and careful process culminated at a crossroad. Guided by the courage and wisdoms of delegations, I was glad to be part of the collective efforts in fighting against nuclear weapons.

And now, it is time to pass the baton to the next generation of diplomats, just like how I had received the torch of the Chairmanship from Dato' Sri Muhammad Shahrul Ikram Yaakob, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, prior to assuming my current post in New York.

The efforts and commitments on this front should be continued moving forward, so as to preserve Malaysia's global profile, visibility and standing in opposing nuclear weapons.

I am also very much thankful to a senior diplomat extraordinaire, Tan Sri Hasmy Agam, a pioneering champion of nuclear weapons disarmament who first cultivated my interest and chartered the path on the issue approximately two decades ago.

The responsibility as the Chair was actually a marathon, which required constant energy and thorough substantive support. For this, I am grateful to my team members who were there every step of the way, and to the full support of the Ministry.

It has been a few years since, but the memory vividly comes to live every time I reminisce that closing hour of the meeting, when the time allocated for the Third NPT PrepCom was almost exhausted and all requesting delegations were already given the floor for interventions and final comments.

The closing motions then set in, transitioning smoothly with almost surgical precision. I delivered my final remarks, smiled calmly from the podium, reached for the gavel and gave it a stroke before pronouncing those commanding words for one last time "The Meeting is Adjourned".

The chamber then reverberated with a thunderous applause from delegates and representatives, signifying their appreciation for the best efforts put in, fairness and hopefully credibility of the chairmanship, as well as accomplishments of States Parties, the UN Secretariat, civil society organisations and all relevant stakeholders, in both substantive and procedural areas.

I took a long sigh of relief, at the completion of this major responsibility.

More importantly, I was utterly pleased to know that Malaysia will be acknowledged by posterities as the Chair of the Third NPT PrepCom in 2019.

Dato' Syed Mohamad Hasrin Aidid is Permanent Representative of Malaysia to the United Nations in New York and was Chair of the Third NPT PrepCom for the Tenth NPT Review Conference.

My Journey in Wisma Putra – the Early Part of the Journey

Syed Sultan Idris

Pre Wisma Putra Days

It all started at INTAN when I was pursuing my Diploma in Public Management. During the International Relations Module, seeing how active I was, my colleagues warned me that if I talk too much or participated too actively, they would send me to Wisma Putra. Well, deep in my heart that was where I wanted to serve after completing the programme after all. It was further strengthened when we made a study trip to Wisma Putra. The aura there, with well-dressed and fluent English speaking officers, drew me in. I was especially impressed with (the late) Dato' Siddiq Firdause Mohd Ali, a smart looking gentleman who looked very cultured.

Reporting for Duty at Wisma Putra

On the first day of reporting for duty, we gathered at the meeting room of C Block, Wisma Putra in Kuala Lumpur then, now IDFR.

After the briefing by the Undersecretary for Services, (Dato') Mr. Zainal Alias, I slotted to the East Asia Division together with (Dato') Zulkifli Adnan who ended up covering North Korea (DPRK) and South Korea (ROK) while yours truly was given the Japan Desk. There were three of us in the Division sharing the same room, with the third being the Assistant Director of China Desk.

I still remember vividly, our then Foreign Minister, Tun Ghazali Shafie, reminding us that Wisma Putra officers are the first line of defence, adding that “when you guys fail, the military has to step in”. This reminder was deeply rooted in my mind and became my driving force when serving Wisma Putra both at headquarters and at post.

My 34 years of service in Wisma Putra which began in 1983, took me to six countries, namely, Japan, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Finland (where I opened the Mission), Bahrain and Republic of Ireland. I served as the Second Secretary in Tokyo, Charge d'Affaires in Abu Dhabi, Consul General in Jeddah and Ambassadors in Helsinki, Manama and Dublin. My journey back home was no less interesting despite having served only in the Political Department. I was an Assistant Secretary in the East Asia Division when I first joined the service. After which, I was assigned to the Southeast Asia Division twice as Assistant Secretary and then, Senior Assistant Secretary, followed by the ASEAN Division where I was the Director and later on, the Deputy Director General. I completed my final leg at headquarters as the Undersecretary of Americas Division prior to my last posting to Dublin in 2014 and thereafter, my retirement at post in 2016.

Assistant Secretary Japan Desk

My first Senior Assistant Secretary was (the late) Mr. James Ang and subsequently, Mr. Mohammed Muda, a.k.a Ben Muda. Not long after I was assigned to the Desk, the then Prime Minister of Japan, Mr. Yasuhiro Nakasone was scheduled to make an official visit to Malaysia at the invitation of the Government of Malaysia, by the then Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, with whom I had the privilege of serving until his retirement in 2003. I was then the Deputy Director General of the ASEAN-Malaysia National Secretariat.

In preparation for Prime Minister Nakasone's official visit to Malaysia, the first hurdle was to prepare a Cabinet Paper to seek Cabinet's approval and to request funds from the Treasury for the visit. With no prior knowledge of how to handle a visit, I took the bull by the horns and went around asking my colleagues and seniors on how to go about it. To my surprise, none of them have done it either and were not able to advise me. In the end, I resorted to reading the files and successfully prepared my maiden Cabinet Paper.

With the newly introduced Look East Policy (LEP), the Japan Desk was busy with numerous exchanges of visits. Many other related programmes too evolved, like the 21st Century Youth Programme, JICA's active involvement, sending students to study in Japan and organising study tours.

My first task at headquarters was the Official Visit of Prime Minister Nakasone in May 1983 while my last task was arranging the official visit of the Head of State of USA, President Barack Obama to Putrajaya in November 2014 to attend the ASEAN Summit related meetings. In retrospect, those two high profile visits were the climaxes of my service at the headquarters.

First Posting – Tokyo, Japan

Prior to my posting, I went to Japan for the 21st Century Youth Programme under the LEP and later in 1985, to study Japanese under the Gaimusho (Foreign Ministry of Japan) programme.

After the completion of my Japanese language programme, I received a posting order to report for duty at the Embassy of Malaysia in Tokyo. It was unique in the sense that I did not go back to Malaysia to pack and send my personal effects before being posted, but only did it a few months later when I went home to get married to Zarinah who was my DPA course mate at the then INTAN at Jalan Elmu.

I reported for duty to the Ambassador, who was then Datuk Ahmad Kamil Jaafar and assumed the post of Second Secretary and the Head of Chancery. I was shocked and did not expect to take up the post of Head of Chancery too, as I was the most junior officer in the Embassy and there were many seniors available to fill the post.

Further, I had to deal with senior officials, including the ambassador, on matters pertaining to the administration of the Embassy. In the early 80s, the Embassy in Tokyo was a full-fledged Embassy with all the posts filled up in the descending order of Ambassador, Minister, Minister-Counsellor, Counsellor, First Secretary, Second Secretary, Third Secretary and Attachés. The ambassadors of those days indeed lived up to their title of Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary. By the time I became an Ambassador in the early millennium, I only had one Second Secretary assisting me which had become a norm in most of the small missions. The big missions also did not have all their posts filled as it used to be in the 80s.

I learned a lot in my first posting, thanks to my ambassador who delegated me to attend many of the diplomatic social functions. One of those pinnacles

was representing the Ambassador at the Emperor's Spring Festival where we had to board a chartered train with security both inside and all along the train route. Such was the extent of protection accorded to us as we were the guests of the Emperor. It was indeed an honour as well as a great experience and exposure to get a precious chance to mingle among the elites and high-ranking Japanese civil servants and for me the ambassadors too. It also helped in boosting my confidence level.

I had the chance to see the whole of Japan, except for Hokkaido, both during my student days pursuing the Japanese language course and as a diplomat on official and private trips. I left Tokyo in 1986 and returned in 2003 for an ASEAN-related meeting. God willing, I hope to revisit Japan to cover Hokkaido one day.

As the LEP was taking shape then, I witnessed many visits from various Malaysian agencies. Among the royalties who often visited Tokyo was His Royal Highness Sultan Iskandar of Johor. The then Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad also made frequent visits. In one of his visit, Tun Mahathir wanted to visit a factory which converted coconut shells into beautiful artefacts such as bowls and ladles. The owner of the factory called to say that it was a small factory located in a remote area and the dust from the factory production made it an unconducive environment. Tun Mahathir, however, insisted on going and I accompanied him to the factory. On our way back, Tun Mahathir explained why he had insisted on visiting the factory – to see things first hand to enable him to direct the officials concerned to go and study how they did it. That was Tun Mahathir, the hands-on Prime Minister.

Dealing with the Japanese was not an easy task though. I will share a tough incident with a private Japanese TV station, which I had to convince to achieve Malaysia's objective.

Fuji TV Station was famous for its epic filming of unique places or events around the world through a programme called *Naruhodo! The World*. *Naruhodo* in Japanese means, "I understand" or "I see". Hence, the programme was angled based on how the reporter or producer sees it.

The Naruhodo! The World team was in Malaysia during the *Raya* period in 1987, at the time when Tun Mahathir was hosting *Rumah Terbuka Aidil Fitri* at *Sri Perdana* (the then official residence of the Prime Minister). The team went for the *Rumah Terbuka* and filmed the event, as this was a unique affair where tens of thousands of Malaysians and foreign tourists made a beeline for *Sri Perdana*.

The team captured footages of guests zooming in on the food and the food disappearing almost instantly as if in a magic scene of “now you see it, now you don’t”. Unfortunately, that did not paint a good image of Malaysians in general, who looked as though they were in starvation. After a few rounds of negotiations with the TV station together with our Information Officer, the team finally agreed to remove those footages.

Besides the official functions and events, my fellow colleagues and I were also active in extra-curricular activities. During the yearly summer hikes up Mount Fuji, I managed to conquer the mountain twice, once in the first year of posting when I was still a bachelor and in the following year with my wife.

We also made a winter trip to Niigata to celebrate *Hari Raya* with the Malaysian students there. It was an eerie driving experience for me going through a ten-kilometre tunnel of dual carriageway which was temporarily converted into a single carriageway, as the inbound carriageway was undergoing maintenance work. This made driving difficult as the road was icy. It was also my first-time using chain tyres to prevent skidding and which also acts as an ice breaker. When we reached the end of the tunnel, we were already in the eastern shore of the Honshu Island facing the Sea of Japan. We were greeted by a totally white flashing scene which dazzled our eyes due to the brightness. I recall a similar situation when I had to drive cautiously up a narrow, climbing road towards North Carpe (some 1,600-kilometre journey) with ravines on both sides during my posting in Helsinki in 2011. One cannot make a U-turn and is forced to continue the journey due to the narrowness of the road and the ravines.

There was another memorable event which took place in Tokyo before I departed for Malaysia. I had gone to Gaimusho to bid farewell to my counterparts and their superiors. While I was there, I wanted to try my luck

to bid farewell to the Vice-Minister (equivalent to our Secretary General) whom I encountered whenever the Ambassador met with him. I went to his office but was sadly informed by his Personal Assistant that he was in a meeting. However, to my surprise, the Vice-Minister came out of the meeting room as he overheard me on the other side of the door and shook my hands to say goodbye. I felt on top of the world for getting the opportunity to bid farewell to the top-most diplomat in Gaimusho by the most junior diplomat at the Embassy. Thank you Ambassador Kuriyama for the honour given to this young diplomat then. Above all a big thank you to the late Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil from whom I learned a lot and who made my first posting one of the most memorable ones.

Dato' Syed Sultan Idris, who hails from Penang, served Wisma Putra until 2016 as Ambassador to Ireland. He is now serving the community through several NGOs. He is presently the Deputy Chairman of Putrajaya Lake Club and a Council Member at KIWF.

Reminiscing Cuba

Zulkifli Adnan

I had the good fortune of visiting Cuba a total of four times. The first three happened when we had yet to establish our Embassy in Cuba. I was first connected to Cuba when I started my second overseas assignment as the First Secretary at our Permanent Mission of Malaysia to the United Nations in New York in August 1993.

In addition to our main task of representing Malaysia on various issues at the United Nations, we were also concurrently accredited to five countries in the Caribbean – Barbados, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Cuba. I was assigned by our Ambassador/Permanent Representative, Tan Sri Razali Ismail, as the desk officer looking after the five countries. It was only in March 2001 that we established our Embassy in Havana.

My first visit was in 1994 when we were negotiating the Sports Cooperation Agreement between Malaysia and Cuba. I was somewhat anxious at first when asked to fly to Spanish-speaking Cuba alone to help with the delegation. Soon after arriving, however, I realised that my worries were unfounded, and the negotiations went on without a hitch. The delegation was led by the Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports, and we managed to sign the Agreement during this visit. Despite its small population of some ten million, Cuba has been very successful in athletics and sports on the world stage. In the previous Olympic Games in Barcelona in 1992, Cuba raked in a very impressive medal tally of 14 golds, 6 silvers and 11 bronzes, and was ranked fifth overall at the time.

I was pleasantly surprised when I was asked to accompany prominent businessman Ananda Krishnan to Havana on a four-day business trip in

early 1997. This time, my excitement at meeting the elusive businessman in person and flying in his private jet outweighed any trepidation I felt the first time I flew to the island. We travelled from New York to Havana with a stopover in Miami, from which he then proceeded to French Guiana for the launch of his MEASAT satellite.

By my third visit, I was already experienced at handling the Prime Minister himself and the many VIPs in the delegation. This visit was on the occasion of our then Prime Minister, Dato' Sri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's first official visit to Cuba in September 1997, with a large entourage comprising Ministers, Chief Ministers, senior officials and businessmen in a chartered Malaysia Airlines Boeing 747. More than anything though, I was looking forward to witnessing the Prime Minister's first official encounter with the Cuban leader, President Fidel Castro.

The above visits were all official. My final and fourth visit to Cuba in 2011, on the other hand, was strictly private and personal, and which I will share later.



I had the opportunity to meet Castro during my third visit to Cuba. I remember anxiously waiting for his arrival in the lobby of the hotel Meliá Cohiba. Our Prime Minister and his entourage were all in friendly conversation with each other.

Castro's dark Soviet-era limousine eased to the front of the lobby entrance. As we slowly walked towards the sliding glass door, I saw in full view for the first time, up close, Castro coming out of the official car in his traditional military fatigues. His aide-cum-interpreter was quick to see to him, who was herself in military fatigues. Castro stood still while the aide patted down his uniform to clear off any unsightly dust and creases. She also made sure the cuffs of his pants were neatly tucked into his shiny boots. Clearly this was their routine. Only then did Castro walk in to meet Mahathir halfway to shake hands in greeting.

It was an unforgettable moment for me – seeing such a remarkable figure

in the flesh. It was like witnessing pages from a history book come to life. I remember before this event, I spent months preparing and reading up on him. I remember specifically the biography by Robert E. Quirk that I read from cover to cover, trying to find out more about the President's background and life, and what I should expect to see. Until now, I am still not sure what I expected. But I still remember that moment during the function that evening, when Castro asked me whether I had been to The Tropicana – a huge open-air cabaret show of music, lights, glitter, and dazzling performances, similar to the cabarets Ricky Ricardo hosted on old reruns of *I Love Lucy*. I recall replying that I had intended to do so but the evening drizzle and cold temperatures over the past few days had dampened my plans. He quipped, without skipping a beat, "Just get a bottle of rum and you will be fine". I remember his spontaneous response until today.

On another occasion, during the formal meeting between Castro and Mahathir, I remember how the aide-cum-interpreter seemed to mimic exactly what Castro was saying – her facial expressions and hand gestures, the emphasis. It was a joy to watch her interpret in long, clear sentences, as if Castro himself was speaking in English. It was apparent that she had been working with him for quite a while. One could only wonder about the stories she could tell.

President Castro speaks English reasonably well. Speaking Spanish would certainly benefit his delegation, who were taking notes during the meeting.



I left New York in 1998 after having completed my assignment for almost five years. As such, my Havana days were over. Or so, I thought.

There were two major related events. One, my daughter, Amirah, had completed her A-Levels and wanted to do a gap year to break away from her books and routine. She was only about 17 years old at the time and we were a bit reluctant at first. However, after a bit of back and forth, and after she had voiced her desire to pursue a Spanish language programme in Latin America, I approached a few embassies in Kuala Lumpur – Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Spain and Venezuela. But unfortunately, it was the height of the

financial crisis and all embassies were affected. Scholarship awards were no longer available. Except from Cuba.

I remember inviting the Ambassador, His Excellency Pedro Monzón, for lunch at the Summer Palace restaurant in Marriott Putrajaya. My wife, Hawa, came along. We had a very pleasant conversation and a week later, the embassy called. I was told that scholarships were only available for a degree programme that would stretch over 5 years, plus the one-year Spanish language course. It was not what we had initially planned. But after Amirah's interview with Ambassador Monzón, we all warmed up to the idea. Even then, I recall discussing with Hawa about it one evening. We finally relented. At least Amirah's movements would be restricted to just an island, and not backpacking through Latin America with her best friend Fuzeani Fauzi, as was her initial plan.

Amirah went on to study at La Universidad de Ciencias Pedagógicas “Félix Varela” in Santa Clara, some 280 km southeast of Havana. The then Ambassador, Zainol Abidin Omar, a family friend, and the Embassy staff certainly helped Amirah in settling down. This was in November 2005. She did exceptionally well in her studies and was awarded *El Título de Oro* for graduating with the highest Grade Point Average in her class. We really appreciated the generosity of the Cuban government in awarding the scholarship to her. Up until then, no Malaysian had ever taken it. She became a pioneer, becoming the first Malaysian student to undertake full-time studies in a Cuban institution of higher learning. There were others who came after her, all pursuing studies in medicine. In my daughter's case though, she ended up not only coming back with a Cuban degree, but with a Cuban husband as well – the pleasant and well-mannered Yoandry Luis, whom we all fondly call Yoyi. This was the second major event that took me back to Cuba this last time.

The final visit to Cuba was about 14 years after my last visit and was significantly different to all my previous ones. I was the Ambassador to Bosnia-Herzegovina at the time and took a ten-day vacation from my post, flying from Sarajevo to Havana via Frankfurt. It was a whirlwind visit, taking us from Havana to Santa Clara, and back. With the help of my colleague, Yean Yoke Heng, our Ambassador in Havana, and the embassy officials,

who had all helped us in so many ways, we were able to plan the *akad nikah* which took place on 3 March 2011 at the Embassy. The ceremony was solemnised by the late Imam Yahya Pedro Lazo Torres, President of the Muslim Association in Cuba. We also had the wedding reception in Havana at Restaurante Pabellón del Tesoro at the Marina Hemingway the next day. We really appreciated the Ambassador's assistance in making the arrangements, particularly in having the resident ASEAN Ambassadors and their spouses present at the event. It certainly brought some prestige and glamour to the reception, with Cuban cigars all round, compliments of the host.

The final event was held at Restaurante El Palmar at Hotel La Granjita, in Santa Clara. My daughter and her new husband had made all the arrangements, and the guests were mostly their friends from the university and my son-in-law's family and relatives. It was here in Santa Clara that I saw a different side of Cuba, one that I was unable to see on all my official visits before. Away from the fancy hotels and resorts, and typical tourist traps, I was fascinated to experience this other side; things I had only read about in the stories my daughter told us in her emails – the horse-drawn carriages that are part of the local transport system, hailing rides from strangers in classic 50's cars, witnessing locals break out in song and dance in the street, and the hospitality and kindness of the people. Even with the little they have; they are one of the warmest and most generous people. It was no wonder to me that the iconic Ernesto "Che" Guevara had chosen Santa Clara to be his home in Cuba, where his remains still lie today in the Guevara Memorial Mausoleum, together with 29 of his fellow combatants, killed together with him in Bolivia in 1967.

I was certainly intrigued when Yoyi related to me recently, the story about his grandfather actually meeting Che Guevara in Santa Clara. But I will save this story for another time.



It has been almost three decades since I first step foot on Cuban soil. Looking back at that first time, I would never have imagined the impact it would have not only on my life, but on my daughter's as well. She would say that it was

a very Cuban sentiment to have, thinking about fate or destiny, but it is hard to think otherwise. Over the years, I have learned a lot about Cuba, from both my daughter and my son-in-law. It was from them I learned that during my first three trips to Cuba, it was at the height of what the Cubans call “*el periodo especial*” or “the special period,” when Cuba was hit hard by an economic crisis made worse by the fall of the Soviet Union, on which they were very dependent. This was on top of the unilateral US embargo on Cuba since 1962. It was during this time my son-in-law, only a young boy then, endured hardships that were only lessened thankfully due to the good fortune of his grandfather working on a farm. I had no idea back then. We only witnessed the glitz and the glamour of the Havana landscape and history made mythical by their legendary leader.

It is funny how things turn out. Every time I leave Cuba, I always assume it will be the last. But as it so happens, Amirah and Yoyi now live in California. Yoyi is now with the US Navy and is based in San Diego. I plan on visiting them probably in the spring of 2022 for Amirah’s graduation commencement ceremony. She will have completed her master’s degree at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas later this year. This will be the best opportunity for me to reconnect once more with my Cuban family in Santa Clara. I have pleasant memories with them that I hope to share in the future. Cuba definitely has not seen the last of me.

Dato’ Zulkifli Adnan served in the Foreign Service for 35 years and retired in 2018. He was Malaysia’s Ambassador to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Germany and Singapore. He also previously served in Sri Lanka, the United States (New York) and the Netherlands.



JAPAN IMMIGRATION INSPECTOR
上陸許可
LANDING PERMISSION
許可年月日
Date of period: 18 NOV 2019
在留期限
Until: 16 FEB 2020
在留資格
Status: 短期滞在
Duration: 90days
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KOREA IMMIGRATION
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ADMITTED
2016 AUG 24
UNTIL 2016 NOV 24
INCHON AIRPORT 372

대한민국
DEPARTED
2016 AUG 28
INCHON AIRPORT
239
REPUBLIC OF KOREA

IMMIGRATION
KRABI THAILAND
VISACLASS
31 JAN 2018
ADMITTED
UNTIL 31 MAR 2018

IMMIGRATION
KRABI THAILAND
VISACLASS
31 JAN 2018
ADMITTED
UNTIL 31 MAR 2018

IMMIGRATION
KRABI THAILAND
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SIGNED

IMMIGRATION
KRABI THAILAND
VISACLASS
20 AUG 2018
SIGNED

IMMIGRATION
KRABI THAILAND
VISACLASS
-6 FEB 2019
SIGNED

IMMIGRATION
KRABI THAILAND
VISACLASS
2016 AUG 24
2016 NOV 24
INCHON AIRPORT 372

IMMIGRATION
SUWARNABHUMI AIRPORT THAILAND
VISACLASS
16 SEP 2018
ADMITTED

IMMIGRATION
SUWARNABHUMI AIRPORT THAILAND
VISACLASS
1 FEB 2019
ADMITTED

IMMIGRATION
SUWARNABHUMI AIRPORT THAILAND
VISACLASS
2016 AUG 28
INCHON AIRPORT
239
REPUBLIC OF KOREA

IMMIGRATION
KRABI THAILAND
VISACLASS
31 JAN 2018
ADMITTED
UNTIL 31 MAR 2018

VISITOR VISA
Current for three (3) months
2044
9 789832 220367

IMMIGRATION
BANGKOK THAILAND
VISACLASS
14 DEC 2019
ADMITTED
UNTIL 12 JAN 2020
SIGNED

