

Our diplomats can match the best in the world

MUCH has been said about our diplomats lacking skills to move our diplomacy forward. I believe this is a gross misrepresentation of the matter.

Having been involved in the training of Malaysian diplomats since 2013, I wish to share what I have experienced in the efforts to raise the skills of budding diplomats.

While a lot has been achieved by the Training Division in the Foreign Ministry, things became more serious once the ministry established its training premises, the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) at the former Foreign Ministry building in Kuala Lumpur in 1991.

Now into its 30th year, IDFR has acquired a degree of respectability and consistency in diplomatic training at the diploma level and the training of international diplomats under the aegis of the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme.

A master's level programme has been relaunched with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Performance-wise, our diplomats have been able to match the best in the world in ensuring that our national interest is promoted and protected.

Our voices on palm oil, climate change, the environment, the rights of Palestinians and other displaced persons around the world have been well-received and applauded in global forums and by world bodies, such as the United Nations.

If there are skill deficits to be addressed, these would likely have come from the perennial problem of surviving in an environment of constant shifts and turns in

diplomacy worldwide.

Diplomacy today demands much more of our diplomats.

In fact, it is almost impossible to draw the line between what is official and unofficial and what is done during or after regular office hours.

The limits are decided upon only by the ingenuity of the person in the spot.

In a foreign country, the diplomat is the only person recognised by the local authorities as representing the interests of the sending country, the only "official" they want to deal with.

As diplomats, we are on our toes 24/7, which means we are no longer owners of our privacy.

We have surrendered our hearts and souls to the Internet, the mobile phone and the computer notebook. We are available all day long. Our time is the public's time.

There are two types of "public" here.

First, the Malaysian public we are required to serve.

The other "public" refers to the arrival and departures of royal members, government officials, dignitaries, delegates and other VIPs that expect protocol assistance at entry points and exits.

There are Malaysians in almost all countries as students, employees or non-permanent residents. The biggest group is students. Some are married and have families.

Diplomats may need to respond to circumstances that they are least prepared for.

DR AZHARI-KARIM

Former Malaysian ambassador,
Kuala Lumpur