

# ALIRAN

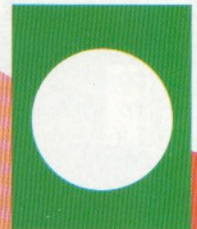
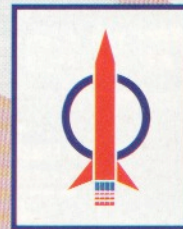
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TIME  
TO  
SPEAK  
OUT



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# TIME TO SPEAK OUT

## *Election Commission must assert its independence and condemn unethical practices*

For decades, the Election Commission has remained silent in the face of dubious practices during election campaigns.

As the nation gears up for its ninth general election, ANIL NETTO urges the Commission to live up to its role as an independent body whose members are appointed by the King.

The time has come for the Commission to speak out against unfair and unethical practices in the coming election campaign period.



Election campaign must be free and fair

DO  
THE  
STORY



NEXT PAGE

"Hundreds of opposition party supporters cross over to the ruling coalition" - a typical news item in the media during every Malaysian general election campaign. How true such reports are is anyone's guess. But it's a familiar story - illustrating how politicians exploit the media to influence voting patterns. And it doesn't contribute to a fair election campaign either.

With the ninth general election nearing, attention has shifted to the Election Commission's role in ensuring free and fair polls. In previous elections, the Commission merely confined itself to ensuring that registration of voters, nominations and polling were carried out smoothly. But many Malaysians feel this alone is insufficient if the Commission is to truly live up to its role as an independent body. They want the Commission to assert its independence, to speak out and take action against unethical practices in campaigning and voting.

To its credit, the Commission has already put forward a couple of positive recommendations. Recently, it recommended that the media should give fairer coverage for all political parties. The Commission also asked the government to lift the ban on public rallies to allow parties ample opportunity to reach out to the electorate.

#### **MEDIA ACCESSIBILITY**

But old habits die hard. The mass media is unlikely to heed the Commission's advice. Because they have to apply to the Home Ministry every year for a new publication permit, they are wary of antagonising the government by expanding their coverage of oppo-

sition party activities. What's more, ruling coalition parties exercise considerable control, directly or indirectly, over most of the major press companies; who can force them then to give more space for opposition parties?

Some of the Chinese language papers, however, have proved to be less subservient to ruling parties, treading a more independent path. Their coverage of opposition party activities has been relatively balanced. But that could change. The Home Ministry recently warned three dailies - Far Eastern Economic Review (2 March 1995) identified them as Nanyang Siang Pau, Sin Chew Jit Poh and China Press - that they risked losing their licences if they continued to publish articles undermining "the government's efforts in creating a multiracial society." An implicit threat to toe the line, with the general election approaching.

Opposition parties will thus find it difficult persuading newspapers to publicise their manifestos. And this will put them at a considerable disadvantage because these dailies will have no qualms about splashing the ruling coalition's manifesto, activities and views across their pages. If at all these papers cover the activities of opposition parties, readers can expect such reports to be biased or tucked away in some obscure part of the paper.

If Malaysians cannot expect much from their newspapers, then they should give up all hope on television. The government has announced that it will not allow political parties any direct air-time although it will allow the networks to report on party activities. What

this means is that RTM and TV3 will once again feature the ruling coalition prominently over prime news, chat shows, forums and patriotic ditties, while portraying the opposition parties negatively.

Such one-sided coverage has provoked the ire of concerned Malaysians. "It is unfair," says Masilamany, a personnel assistant at a factory in Butterworth. "The government controls the media and the opposition has no chance to put across its ideas and plans to the people."

The Information Ministry, however, says that it will provide more time for political parties over the radio. Still, the impact pales in comparison to television - which combines pictures with sound to create powerful mental images. Though radio may have a wider reach, it serves merely as a background medium while listeners attend to other tasks: thus, listeners rarely absorb much of the message conveyed.

Besides, no one knows how the Ministry will allocate radio air-time between the various parties. An equitable basis would be to divide it in the same proportion as each party's share of the popular vote at the last general election.

If at all radio is to play a meaningful role in the campaign, the Ministry should also announce prominently the time and date of each political broadcast. During the 1990 campaign, hardly anyone knew when the stations were broadcasting these short clips.

Surely if the Commission is truly independent, it ought put its foot down and say that the overall lack of media accessibility is unaccept-

able. It should warn television and radio networks and newspapers that their practices are unethical and not conducive to a fair election.

### REACHING OUT

Because the Commission realises that opposition parties have limited access to the mass media, it recommended that the government lift the ban on public rallies. This would give all parties some opportunity to present their manifestos to the public. The electorate would then be in a position to evaluate the plans and proposals of the various parties. But the government poured cold water over this commendable proposal.

Public rallies were banned in the seventies ostensibly because of the communist threat. With that threat now wiped out, the Home Ministry should now allow parties to campaign openly as in any other healthy functioning democratic nation. But this is unlikely to happen; the official line is that public rallies could incite ethnic tension.

Observers like Masilamany remain cynical about the continuing ban: "Although they are saying that rallies are banned, at the end of the day the ruling party will organise rallies using such occasions as Semarak campaigns and other government 'meet-the-people' functions."

So far, the Commission's advice has been consistently brushed aside. It appears content playing a passive role, doling out well-meaning advice even though it hardly ever receives a positive response. Is it therefore totally powerless and helpless? According to many political observers, no.

The Commission is duty bound to ensure that elections are free and fair. To compensate for the lack of media access and the ban on public rallies, it can, for instance, fix a longer campaign period between nomination day and polling day to level the playing field a little; however, it has regularly chosen to stick to the legal minimum of nine days for reasons best known to itself. "Having only nine days for campaigning is a big disadvantage for the opposition," points out Aliran exco member John Kim. Former Aliran president Dr Ariffin Omar agrees: "It seems to favour the party in power because they are always campaigning over TV and radio."

### BRIBING VOTERS

The Commission should also watch out for attempts to bribe voters. In previous campaigns such bribes took various imaginative forms including gifts such as bicycles, lawnmowers, grass cutters, television sets, electricity generators, chainsaws and water pumps. Another popular way of influencing voters is for candidates to pledge donations to schools especially those run independently. Candidates have also been known to dish out land titles and temporary occupation licences (TOLs) to the disinherited. Anything for a vote.

The more unscrupulous candidates resort to literally bribing voters with cash in exchange for votes. At the 1990 general election, the going rate was said to be RM 50 to RM 100 per vote. With inflation biting, the payouts this time could well be larger. A more subtle way of handing out cash is through the anak angkat scheme. Under this method, party workers 'adopt' a family and pay for their

living expenses for the duration of the campaign - a 'hard-sell' attempt at swaying votes.

Many informed Malaysians frown on such dubious practices. "This is not the time for any party to handout goodies," says John. "Rather it is a time for Malaysians to have an intelligent discussion about the policies and manifestos of the various parties."

But where do political parties get the funds to finance such 'goodies'? Under existing legislation, candidates for parliamentary seat can only spend a maximum of RM 50,000, while those vying for state seats cannot exceed RM 30,000. Many suspect that politicians frequently ignore these limits or enlist the help of party headquarters for additional funds to supplement their local coffers.

The Commission must step in to ensure that candidates do not exceed their spending limits. It should carry out random audits to verify the spending of selected candidates. Alternatively, the Commission could recommend that all candidates use public funds to finance their campaign expenditure subject to prescribed spending limits. In this way, no one party will have an undue advantage.

Besides monitoring spending limits, the Commission should see to it that ruling parties do not abuse government facilities for campaigning. Past experience has shown that ruling party politicians think nothing of using government jets and helicopters, Information Ministry vans and posters, state television and radio, and statutory agencies to further their cause.

Indeed, once the Prime Minis-

ter dissolves Parliament, the Commission should draw a distinction between the ruling party's normal government business and election campaigning. Says John: "The Election Commission should ensure that the outgoing government remains as a caretaker government."

If abusing government facilities is unethical, many Malaysians are disgusted over attempts to manipulate communal and religious sentiments to win votes. Many can recall the 'cross incident' at the last election involving Semangat 46 leader Tengku Razaleigh wearing the traditional headgear of the Kadazan community in Sabah. Then the Barisan Nasional using its control over the Malay Press made inflammatory accusations against him in an attempt to win over Muslim votes. The details are provided in the accompanying article.

Manipulation of emotions can assume more insidious forms. Certain politicians have already started issuing veiled threats that 'political stability' is vital for development and ethnic harmony - the underlying implication being that chaos and communal riots will break out if voters decide in favour of the opposition: playing the May 13 bogey, as it were. Such thinly disguised threats are despicable. The Commission must severely reprimand guilty politicians or even lodge police reports to safeguard public interest.

The Commission's vigilance should also extend to polling day. Many party workers are dissatisfied over the lack of supervision of postal ballots which offers much room for abuse. Besides this, a large number of voters are also appre-

hensive about the secrecy of their ballot since voter registration numbers are noted on the counterfoils of the ballot papers: this makes it possible, theoretically at least, to know how a particular voter has voted. The Commission must do away with the practice of recording numbers on counterfoils to allay such fears.

Now that voting is actually counted at the polling station itself instead of a central counting centre for each constituency, voters also fear that winning candidates will penalise those areas which have voted against them by withholding development funds. To overcome this, the Commission should consider reverting to the old method of counting votes at main counting centres.

Whether the coming general election will be a free and fair one depends largely on the Commission. Is the Commission independent enough to wage an all out war against unethical practices? Will it be courageous enough?

On paper, it should be independent. The King appoints the chairman and other members of the Commission after consulting the Conference of Rulers; commission members have security of tenure until the age of 65. Thus, it is morally bound to live up to its independence and the tremendous responsibility that goes along with it.

But many analysts remain unconvinced about the Commission's impartiality. "The dice is loaded against them," says Ariffin. "I don't think they are really independent; they are more or less under government control."

Malaysian voters fervently hope that the Election Commission will prove sceptics like him wrong. Perhaps the Commission should follow the example of its counterpart in India which is now making life difficult for both the ruling and opposition parties in India when they breach the elections ordinance in that country. ♦

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**"In matters of conscience, the law of majority has no place."**

*Gandhi*

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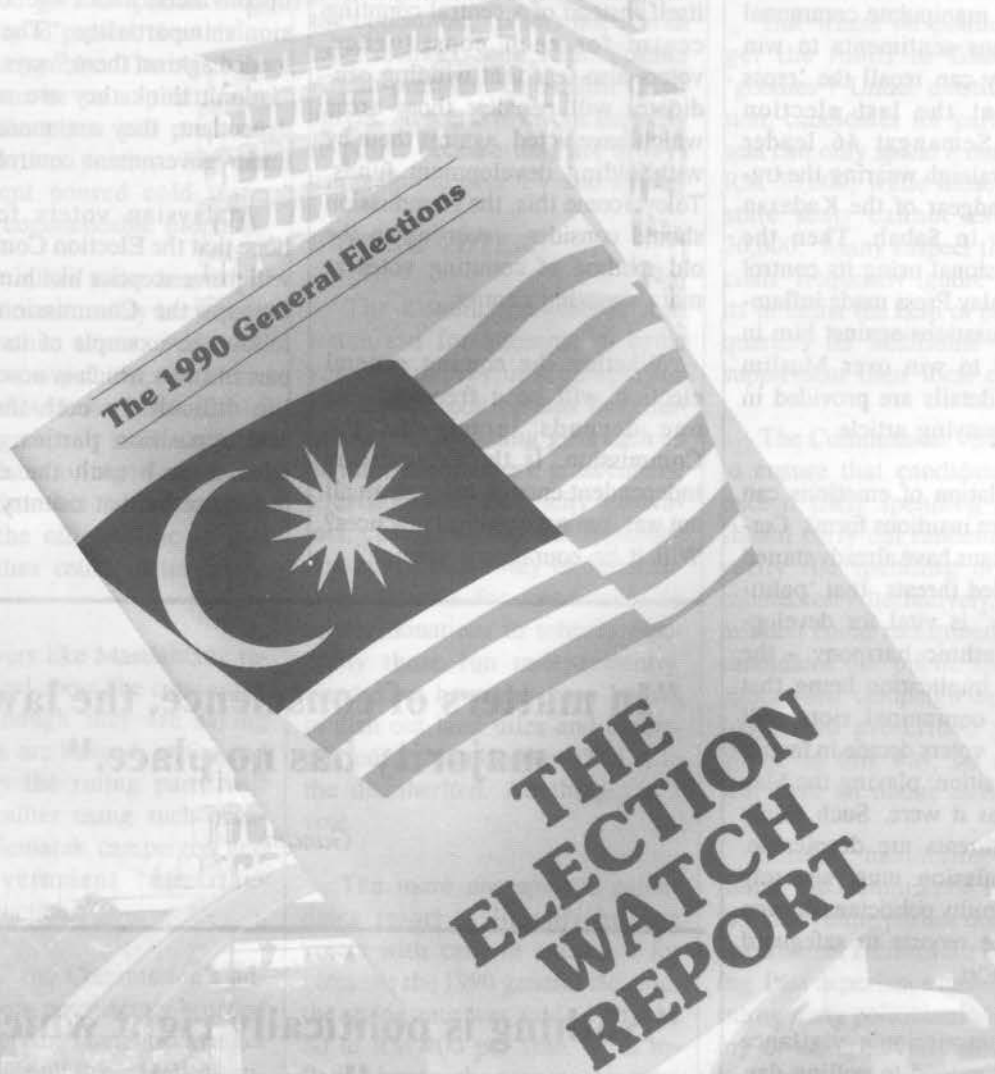
**"Nothing is politically right which is morally wrong."**

*Thomas Jefferson*

## **ELECTIONS**

# **WILL HISTORY REPEAT ITSELF?**

EXTRACTS FROM



# THE CAMPAIGN PERIOD

## A. The Caretaker Government

The Prime Minister showed awareness of the role of the government during the period while Parliament was dissolved. Commenting on requests of the Sabah-based party, PBS, he said that because the government was a caretaker one during the period of elections, he was not in a position to agree to those requests.

However, the deeds of leaders of the incumbent coalition belied these words. Government facilities were freely used for campaigning purposes. This ranged from the Executive jet used to fly the Deputy Prime Minister to Sabah on a mission to minimize the damage to the incumbents by the pullout of the PBS from the Barisan Nasional, to vans of the Jabatan Penerangan (Information Department) used by UMNO workers in Kampar, Perak. In various areas around Cameron Highlands pictures of the Prime Minister and the Mentri Besar (State Chief Minister) which had been posted had the words "Dikeluarkan oleh Jabatan Penerangan Malaysia" ("Produced by the Information Department of Malaysia") printed at the bottom right-hand corner.

Various reports have been received of how officers of the Education Ministry had been used to campaign for the incumbents. Details are available of a senior official of the Maktab Perguruan Persekutuan Pulau Pinang (Penang Teachers Training College) informing lecturers of the College that he had been asked to deliver a message from the Education Minister to the effect that lecturers should vote for the Barisan Nasional to ensure a strong, stable government, and of the Headmaster of a primary school in Ringlelet, Pahang, canvassing for the Barisan Nasional at a polling station on polling day. In the parliamentary constituency of Balik Pulau, Penang, officials of the state and district education departments were reported to have organized a meeting of parent-teacher associations at which the audience was asked to vote for the Barisan Nasional.

The campaigning period also saw incumbent leaders distributing to the people gifts financed by government funds, and giving out awards which had earlier been decided on by the government. The Deputy Prime Minister gave away bicycles in

Kelantan. Pictures of these bicycles show that they were meant for children and were not the type which would ease the labour of the estate/farm workers to whom they were distributed. Other bicycles were found stored in the premises of Kesedar (a government agency) at Gua Musang on the day prior to their distribution. The newspapers reported of one of the incumbent leaders giving away lawn-movers, grass cutters, television sets, generators, chainsaws and water pumps (said to cost \$15,000/- each) and pledging to give \$427,000/- for improving various schools in his constituency, while campaigning. Similar pledges to schools were made by various other incumbent leaders during the campaign period, including the Minister of Education and the Mentri Besar of Selangor. Land titles were also given out during this period by various incumbents including members of the Cabinet and of the dissolved State Legislative Assemblies.

Distributing these cash hand-outs, gifts and land titles during the campaign period with the exhortation to the people to 'vote the government' served further to blur the distinction in the public mind between the government and the parties in power. It could lead the public to perceive that these hand-outs, gifts and land titles and other awards were a token of the beneficence of the party in power and not simply deserved relief from the government. Whatever the public perception might have been, making these distributions during the campaigning period was an abuse of office: it involved using government resources as a means of promoting the image of the incumbent leaders for the purpose of improving their chances of being re-elected.

## B. Exploiting Communal Feelings and Religious Sensitivities

After it was announced that the PBS was pulling out of the Barisan Nasional, the campaign saw a marked change of character. The Prime Minister declared that among the requests of the Sabah party which he could not accede to was the setting up of a television station in Sabah that would be used to spread Christianity. This prompted candidates of the PBS to file police reports against the Prime Minister. They claimed that the alleged reason for having the state television channel was false and that the

allegation was made with the intention of creating ill-will and racial hostility between the peoples of Malaysia. Such allegations could contravene 3(1) of the Sedition Act 1948.

The alleged PBS aim of spreading Christianity was aggravated by pictures appearing in the national dailies, and repeated over several news programmes on television, of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the leader of the opposition alliances, wearing a Kadazan head-gear that bore what seemed to be the symbol of a cross. This picture was enlarged and given prominence over the front page of the **Utusan Malaysia** on 19th October and repeated by the newspaper in its editions for the following two days, which were polling days. For two consecutive days the newspaper ran stories of how members of the Muslim community, including theologians, were enraged by Tengku Razaleigh's wearing an item that bore the symbol of Christianity. The **Berita Harian** newspaper also carried the picture on the front page on the 19th of October, with the caption (as translated into English) "Muslims Across the Country Regret Tengku Razaleigh's Wearing the Head-Gear", quoting someone as having said that it was a disgrace in the eye of Islam. The English dailies carried the picture too but gave it lesser significance.

It was a serious act of irresponsibility on the part of the Malay dailies not to inform the public that the head-gear was a Kadazan, and not a Christian, one. Only some of the Sabah newspapers interviewed the natives of Sabah on the significance of the cross on the head-gear. The Sabah United Bajau Association president, Datuk Salleh Tun Said Keruak, came out to say that the symbol of a cross on the head-gear had nothing to do with religious beliefs. A spokesman for the Sabah Cultural Association pointed out that many native groups in Sabah, whose forefathers produced the various designs used on such head-gear, were pagans and not Christians.

In fact, Kadazan head-gear or *sigah* often bears motifs symbolizing nature. The so-called cross on the controversial head-gear, for instance, is a tapioca shoot (*pucuk ubi*). Most head-gears of this sort are made by the Bajau community which is largely Muslim.

The religious innocuousness of the head-gear is underscored by the fact that even the Prime Minister

himself had worn such a head-gear when he visited Sabah some years back. Pictures of him wearing the item were distributed in various parts of the country. A Barisan Nasional spokesman quoted on the front page of the **Utusan Malaysia** (20th October) however claimed that the picture of the Prime Minister wearing the head-gear was a 'false' one, adding that the head-gear worn by the leader of the Barisan Nasional did not have a cross.

Various Muslim and Malay organizations then came out with statements claiming that recent developments had threatened the special position of the Malays and of Islam in the country and that the Malays had to unite under the Barisan Nasional if the political dominance of the Malay community was to be safe-guarded. The groups concerned included the Muslim Lawyers Association, the Malay Chambers of Commerce of the Federal Territory and of Penang, a group calling themselves "Klang Valley intellectuals not directly involved in politics", various graduate associations, an Alor Star association of intellectuals known as "Majlis Kumpulan Melayu Bertindak" (Malay Group Action Council), and a Kedah fatwa committee. Seven Malay/Muslim organizations in Ipoh came together to issue a joint statement on how Muslim interests were under seige and could only be protected if Islamic political parties in the opposition joined the Barisan Nasional. The President of the Association for members of the Administrative and Diplomatic Services, Dato' Hassan Ibrahim, joined in the call for support for the parties in power, throwing to the wind the principle that government servants should stay out of politics.

The Prime Minister himself publicly said that there was a danger that Muslims would no longer form the back-bone of the government if the opposition was voted to power. He warned that at stake in the elections was whether Muslims would become a minority group in Malaysia and would have to bow to other groups. The Finance Minister similarly warned when speaking in Air Hitam, Kedah, that the position of the Malays was threatened. Dato' Drs. Sulaiman Mohamad, went further and accused Tengku Razaleigh of agreeing to remove Islam from being the official religion of the country.

Meanwhile, UMNO party supporters were known to have disseminated copies of a letter purportedly from the Pope to the leader of the PBS congratu-

lating him for his efforts to spread Christianity and wishing him well in his attempts to destroy Islam. Copies of the Malay dailies with the picture of Tengku Razaleigh wearing the head-gear with the cross were also distributed free in rural areas. The Archbishop Emeritus of the Catholic Church lodged a police report stating that the letter purportedly from the Vatican was a fake, but this was not given any space in the main dailies. Neither did the main dailies report his statement that the Kadazan head-gear had no Christian significance.

The evidence strongly points to the conclusion that the leaders of UMNO decided to counter the effect of the PBS pull-out of the Barisan Nasional by orchestrating a concerted campaign to convince the Malay electorate that this move had dire implications for the dominant position of the Malays and their religion.

Most analysts were agreed that even after the pullout of PBS, the Barisan Nasional would still comfortably have retained a majority in Parliament. The real threat was the Barisan Nasional's two-third majority. The leaders of UMNO demonstrated in their campaign that they were willing to exploit ethnic and religious sensitivities to the full in order to swing the votes of the Malay majority so as to maintain the Barisan Nasional's overwhelming power in Parliament. Their strategy shows that they were concerned more with retaining absolute control over the national legislative chamber than with ensuring that communal feelings were kept under control: narrow political interests were considered more important than the fostering of unity among the various communities.

### **C. Intimidation**

The campaign period saw a number of incidents of intimidation.

In Terengganu some unidentified persons were alleged to have thrown Molotov cocktails at the residence of the Semangat 46 candidate, Tengku Seri Paduka Raja Tengku Ibrahim Ismail, before dawn two days before polling. A report was lodged with the police.

In another case, campaign agents were alleged to have been threatened and assaulted by supporters of rival parties.

In Sungei Siput, members of the IPF party were allegedly assaulted in three separate incidents while campaigning for the DAP candidate.

A report of an assault on a PAS worker alleged to have been committed by the candidate for the Barisan Nasional was also made to the police in Terengganu.

The intimidation of campaign workers included preventing them from meeting the electorate through house to house visits. Semangat 46 workers were reported to have surrounded workers in Kelantan and prevented Barisan Nasional workers from conducting house to house visits in those kampungs. In Sabah, PBS campaigners alleged that they had great difficulty in entering some of the Bajau villages which had been surrounded by the workers of the Barisan Nasional.

A more direct form of intimidation came from the leaders of the Barisan Nasional. The Prime Minister in an interview with newsmen carried over the television warned that the lesson from 1969 was that if the government did not have the two-thirds control of Parliament, there could be trouble. It is not appropriate in this report to deal with the causes of the ethnic riots that followed the general elections of 1969, but it is difficult to see any direct link between ethnic harmony and the size of the Barisan Nasional's majority in Parliament. Yet, the thinly veiled threat from the Prime Minister was that there could be civil disorder if the government was not returned with the majority it sought. Again resort to threats of this kind is not conducive to promoting democracy.

### **D. Attempt to Prevent Voters from Voting**

It was reported that in Gua Musang attempts were made by the party workers of a political party to prevent voters from voting by asking them to hand over their identity cards temporarily in return for cash payment or on the pretext that the cards were required for one purpose or another.

### **E. The 'Anak Angkat' Scheme**

Under this scheme unemployed graduates were recruited by UMNO Youths and sent to stay in the houses of electors identified as fence-sitters. These 'adopted children' would offer the families they stayed with more money than these families could earn for that period, ostensibly in payment for ac-

commodation. The lodgers (the 'adopted children') would then seek to win the votes of the members of the households they stayed with and at the same time prevent workers of the opposition parties from visiting these houses.

#### F. Media Coverage During the Campaign

The opposition parties were severely handicapped in getting their message across to the public through the media. The Barisan Nasional enjoyed having the text of its manifesto printed in full by the leading English daily, the *New Straits Times*, as part of that newspaper's political coverage. *Berita Harian* ran a supplement that consisted solely of the Malay version of the Barisan manifesto together with photographs in full colour. News reports of the opposition's manifestoes appeared in some of the main-stream dailies; but only one national newspaper, a Chinese daily, carried in full a manifesto from the opposition parties. Attempts by the opposition to pay the other dailies normal advertising rates for their manifestoes to be carried in full were of no avail. A couple of small newspapers and magazines, however, gave full coverage to the manifesto of the Gagasan Rakyat coalition and PAS.

The Barisan Nasional, however, had no problem in getting the main-stream dailies to carry full-page advertisements on consecutive pages, ridiculing the opposition and extolling its own leadership. The absence of similar advertisements by the opposition was accordingly most conspicuous.

Apart from their ordinary news programmes, RTM and TV3 carried their own programmes reporting on the election campaign. These programmes focussed largely on the views of leaders of the Barisan Nasional. There was some coverage of the opposition but it was almost entirely of a negative nature.

For instance, an extended interview was aired of a district PAS chief who was disenchanted with the choice of candidate made by the State PAS leadership for his constituency; 'experts', called into the studio to express their opinion, took turns to state that the opposition alliance would not be able to fund the policies it advocated in its manifesto; Tengku Razaleigh's rebuke of a reporter was aired repeatedly to show him as having a haughty and arrogant nature. When the PBS pulled out from the Barisan Nasional, TV3 interviewed Sabahans for their views

on it. All the five persons interviewed expressed the view that it was an opportunist move by the PBS leadership. Considering that the PBS had enough support in the State to capture all the seats it contested, it was surprising that the television channel could not find even one person who had a different view on the PBS move.

The television was also used in a less direct manner to campaign for the incumbents. On prime air time videos of catchy songs like "Setia", "Barisan Kita" and "Quality" would be shown for the purpose of invoking a sense of loyalty and pride both to the nation and, through a subtle choice of lyrics, for the Barisan Nasional.

The various political parties were allocated time for party political broadcasts over the radio. As a step towards allowing all political parties an opportunity to carry its message to electors, this was a measure to be commended. However, the effect of radio broadcasts was somewhat limited due largely to the public not being aware as to when and on what frequencies these broadcasts were aired. The opposition parties had altogether a total of five broadcasts allotted to them, the duration of each broadcast being 13 minutes. Taking into account that the opposition alliance was contesting every seat in the General Elections the time allowed them was not equitable. In any case, there can be no doubt that the more effective medium for informing the electorate of the differences in the stand of the various contesting political parties was not the radio but the television; and on television the opposition parties were not allotted any time at all. ♦



**I have come to  
the conclusion  
that politics is  
too serious to be  
left to the  
politicians.**

*Charles de Gaulle*



# DON'T ROCK THE BOAT DON'T MAKE WAVES

Very early in my Malaysian career, then, I was feeling the cut of the NEP as the double-edged sword it was. It would help the Malays move faster and better, but it would never win them the respect of their fellow countrymen. Advancement they'd be given, respect they'd still have to earn. Malaysia had turned resolutely away from the meritocratic norms of upward mobility, but deep down, where it counted, in the hearts of all Malaysians, the meritocracy would remain. No matter how high a Malay might climb on the back of the NEP, his countrymen would always judge him personally by his own performance - which meant he had to excel, or be damned as a privileged stooge.

### ONLY FOOLS DID MORE

I tried to excel. But this was the government service, and excellence didn't seem all that high on its agenda. Many of the researchers at the FRI (Fisheries Research Institute) were much more than competent, but it was administered as a bureaucracy rather than a scientific establishment, and there was a tacit sense that only fools did more than they had to. One's salary would come anyway at the end of each month, and the progress of one's career depended little on how hard one worked, but more on how long one could stay quietly in place without ruffling feathers or rocking boats.

I was actually told as much by the institute's Director, on my first day there: "Don't rock the boat. Don't make waves." This to an eager young marine biologist who was wild with impatience to leap off boats and plunge through waves? It was not a promising augury.

So the three years I was to spend at the Fisheries Research Institute would be devoted as much to clock-watching, tea-breaking and newspaper-reading as to doing things for the fishermen, or for marine

research in general. Fortunately, there was enough of the latter to make my time there interesting and educational. During the inter-monsoon sessions we would go out on the FRI's research ships-converted trawlers, crewed by an engaging assortment of exfishermen - to survey coral reefs or trap fish for the FRI's big public aquarium, or build artificial reefs of old tyres, the better to replenish fish stocks in depleted areas.

This was, politically, one of the more important projects of the Fisheries Department, and quite a lot of effort was devoted to setting up these structures around the Malaysian peninsula. The artificial reefs were touted as part of the government's effort to help poor fishermen, as indeed they did.

But perhaps our publicity machinery worked a little too well, because one day we received word that the Minister of Agriculture himself was coming to Penang, and that he wanted to give the press a photo-opportunity of himself fishing on one of our famous artificial reefs. This sent the Director into a frenzy. Even the stoutest of efforts hadn't made our experimental reefs around Penang productive, because these structures depended on there being at least the remnants of a natural reef system somewhere nearby, from which to draw their seed-stocks. Penang's waters were nearly dead, opaque with effluent and sewage from the big beach hotels that had sprung up along the northern coast of the "Pearl of the Orient". Within a couple of years, the FRI aquarium would have to shut down because it drew its water from the Penang strait, and its fish were dying of horrible diseases.

### BE DISCREET ABOUT THIS

The best artificial reef for the Minister to fish, where he'd be practically assured of catching something that would make him look suitably heroic, was

a six-hour boat-ride to the north and out of the question.

So the Director called me into his office, bid me shut the door, and gave me urgent instructions. I was to go to the nearby Jelutong fish-farm and purchase a nice, big, fat, live grouper. (A petty-cash voucher would be made available to me for this purpose, or perhaps I'd better use my own money first, and he'd personally reimburse me later, yes, that would be a good idea, we had best be discreet about this.)

Then I was to smuggle the fish in a gunny sack aboard the Minister's boat before he got there, along with myself and my diving equipment, and hide somewhere. When the boat had moored on the reef and the Minister had cast his line, I was to don my scuba gear, slip quietly over the side with my fish and hook it onto the Minister's line. Got that?

I looked at him. He seemed deadly serious. I considered my options. "I don't think I can keep the fish alive long enough, sir," I said. "We'd need to keep it in a salt-water tank with an air dispenser. It would be hard to hide that. It would make noise."

He pondered the problem, nodding slowly. Then he brightened. "It wouldn't have to be *very* alive," he said.

"Then the minute I got it in the water it would revive and want to swim away," I said. "It would not be easy to hold onto a big fish like a grouper under water. They're slippery."

He gave in. "Okay, use a dead fish."

"A *dead* fish, sir?" I said. "What will the Minister say when he sees he's hooked a dead fish?"

"Don't worry about that," said the Director. "We can always say it died on the way up."

"Yes sir," I said. "Anything you say, sir."

I didn't do anything of the sort, of course, although my colleague Edward Wong and I did go along with our scuba gear and jump into the water for the benefit of the media-men accompanying the Minister. The Director's scheme would have been

rendered pointless anyway, thank the stars, because a heaven-sent passing fisherman happened to have a big red snapper in his *sampan*, and the Minister was duly photographed pointing proudly at this fish while its captor held it aloft. The Director was pleased as punch, and gave Edward and me the afternoon off. I've *always* wanted to tell this story, and I recount it here only to underscore the point I made earlier about what it took to advance in the government service.

I made the most of my stint with the FRI, vigorously trying to atone for my lacklustre degree by writing and publishing research papers in local scientific journals, but I hated government service. Its inertia and inefficiency were bad enough, but there was also the matter of the fishermen. The more I grew to know the fishing communities of Malaysia - and I would get to know them quite well in my three years with the Fisheries Department - the more misguided and ineffectual I felt we were.

#### STIGMA TO REMAIN A FISHERMAN

The villages were crumbling. Time and again, on both coasts of the Peninsula, we would come across fishing villages inhabited only by women, infants and the very old. On Pulau Redang, off the East Coast state of Trengganu, I learned how it was almost a stigma for the son of a fisherman to remain a fisherman himself, and not go to the mainland in search of a "real" job. I was astonished. My city-boy sensibilities would have had me gladly trade places with these people, for the sake of Redang's fine reefs and the protein they contained, for the sweet air of these clean skies. But no, these youths wanted more, and I would often see them, or those very like them, in Kuala Trengganu, the state capital, lounging around the cinema at night in their sneakers and jeans and rugby shirts, sullenly smoking cigarettes and seeking opportunities, no doubt.

Elsewhere, entire fishing villages had simply ceased to exist. Their inhabitants had uprooted *en masse* and left for the new agricultural schemes opening in the hinterland, to tend rubber trees or plant oil palm seedlings, and live in the neat little wooden houses built for them by the government. The Federal Land Development Authority, FELDA, had been founded with the nation and grown to be

Malaysia's biggest land bank and resettlement scheme. It had opened up more than a million acres of land for industrial agriculture and relocated to these vast tracts some 10% of the nation's population. Traditional farmers and fishermen had been encouraged to avail themselves of these new opportunities, and many had answered the call. The fishing industry had been increasingly left to large trawler fleets, most of them Chinese-owned, while the Malay fisherman had gone off to try his luck as a planter.

Had no one suggested to the small fisherman that his poverty might be alleviated without his ever having to stop being a fisherman? Pool your resources. Get ten fishermen together with \$1,000 each, and you'll have enough for a down-payment on a trawler of your own. If you don't have even that much money to your names, go get some from the NEP, that's what it's there for. This had indeed been done - and without any help from the NEP - by a group of Indians.

It must have seemed a lot simpler for our fisherman to accept the government's offer of a plot of FELDA land and start life over as a sharecropper. Especially since he would be much more than a mere tenant farmer: he would be part of his nation's crusade to bring development to the hinterland; part of Malaysia's progress; part of the living NEP.

And his beached *sampan* would slowly rot away on a deserted shore.

Within a year of taking up my post at the Fisheries Research Institute I was writing to oil companies and diving firms, shamelessly embellishing my curriculum vitae and pleading for a job. None was forthcoming, and I consoled myself with the pleasant diversions of life in Penang.

#### ETHNIC POLARIZATION

Penang was, despite the frustrations of my job, a very nice place to live. I enjoyed driving around the island or going up the Hill, or simply losing myself in Georgetown's colourful warren of Chinese streets. Penang was a userfriendly place. I shared a small house in Minden Heights with a Chinese teacher, Chu Chin Koo, who would remain a dear friend for life, and Phil Crane, also an avid diver and an

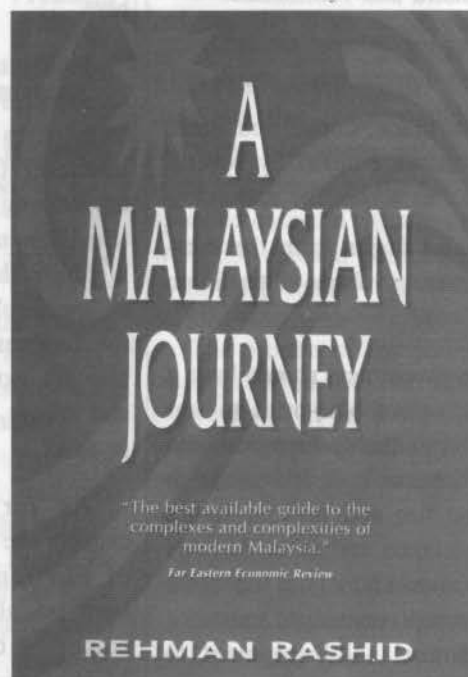
American Peace Corps Volunteer attached to USM - "Universiti Sains," the National Science University.

I hooked myself informally into the university's School of Biological Sciences, which had a credible marine programme and was looking for diving instructors for some of its students. The Underwater Research Group, Universiti Sains Malaysia ("URGUSM", in a word) would be a great success, and Phil and I would have our work cut out for us during our twice-weekly training sessions at the university's swimming pool.

Perhaps by virtue of its location in Penang, USM was the last Malaysian university to succumb to the ethnic polarization of its student body. The phenomenon was already making itself apparent in other colleges, with the Malays and non-Malays drifting further and further apart, and the *Dakwah* movement visibly growing in prominence.

But at least while I was there, in the cusp of the decades, USM was still a funky, lively place. Despite its name, the university housed energetic faculties in Humanities and the Performing Arts. I was glad of that; glad that a Malaysian campus didn't feel as alien to me as I had feared it would. ♦

(Extracted from, "A MALAYSIAN JOURNEY"  
by Rehman Rashid)





## THE HAZARDOUS HAZE

Aliran is worried about the deteriorating haze conditions throughout the nation which have been declared hazardous to health. We believe the haze has been caused by the following:

- \* smoke from forest fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan.
- \* excessive exhaust smoke from many lorries, buses, taxis etc.
- \* thick black smoke and other pollutants emitted by several factories across the nation.
- \* exhaust fumes from the ever-increasing volume of traffic on the road.

The government should have a comprehensive blue-print to improve the air quality. First, it should ask Indonesia how it intends to stop the fire and prevent future fires. Malaysia and other ASEAN nations should offer (and Indonesia should accept) immediate assistance in personnel and equipment to fight the fire.

Indonesia should also appeal for international assistance.

Malaysia and other countries affected should also consider asking Indonesia for compensation for polluting the atmosphere in the region. After all, when the Straits of Malacca was polluted by oil spills, compensation was sought. The same principle should apply here.

Incidentally, why haven't we seen pictures of the Indonesian forest fires over TV? After all, whenever the US and Australia have raging forest fires, Malaysian television networks are quick to highlight the stories accompanied by spectacular visual footage. Are the Indonesians trying to downplay the extent of the forest fires and are we cooperating with them in this?

As for the local factors causing the haze, the Department of Environment has obviously been lax all these years when it comes to booking the culprits. Many lorries and buses are still

belching smoke all around the country. Factories continue to pollute the air. Why are these companies permitted to violate environmental regulations so blatantly? Is it because some of them may have strong political connections which enable them to openly flout the law?

And what can we do about the worsening traffic on the road? Not much, if our system of public transport remains in the state as it is. The government appears to be caught in a bind perhaps because it has spread its tentacles into the business world.

On the one hand, it encourages commuters to car-pool and use public transport but on the other, it is actively promoting the sales of Protons and Kancils, pet projects of those in power. Increased traffic on the road also means more toll collection and revenue for UEM and Renong, the UMNO Baru corporate flagship. So, where is the incentive to urgently improve the public transport system within and between urban areas i.e. to introduce more buses (without smoke), high-speed inter-city electrical trains and urban rail systems?

Clearly, the government and the Malaysian private sector have to clean up their acts before pointing their fingers at the Indonesians. Meanwhile, ASEAN should immediately extend fire-fighting assistance to Indonesia, in the interest of genuine solidarity and to safeguard the health of people in this region.

*Dr S Subramaniam*  
*Treasurer*

1 October 1994

## PUNISHMENT THE ONLY CURE?

Why is it whenever we want to prevent something, we resort to punitive measures? Must punishment be the only cure for the ills of society? This outmoded and archaic response needs rethinking. Death sentences, life sentences and whipping, which we have been ceremoniously dishing out, have not reduced the spate of crime.

Punishment, whatever its form - capital or incarceration or inflicting pain - have not proven to be an effective deterrent.

It doesn't make sense to assume that the so-called *boh-sia* is only committed between midnight and 5 am and therefore a curfew is necessary.

\* Does it mean that *boh-sia* does not take place before midnight and after 5 am? Or does it mean even if it takes place during off-curfew hours it is not a problem?

\* What happens if all the parents refuse to pay the fines for their children's release? Will we be saddled with further problems of food and shelter in our welfare institutions?

\* The police are already hard-pressed to cope with their normal duties. Will *boh-sia* be their top priority now?

Before recommending the cure, the National Unity & Social Development Ministry must establish what causes this social pro-

blem. What are the contributing factors that result in this social malaise?

We must honestly ask whether our political elites are setting the right examples and espousing the right values in their lifestyles for our youngsters to emulate?

We must ask what kind of values our school system emphasises and what role it plays in character moulding?

We must ask whether parents bring up their children or merely finance them?

We must ask what negative influence is promoted by the mass media through its advertisements?

Let's first find sober answers to these questions before recommending simplistic solutions.

**P Ramakrishnan**  
President

8 October 1994

## DON'T SACRIFICE JUSTICE FOR EXPEDIENCY

Aliran views with alarm the government's declared intention to table amendments to the judicial system which would have far-reaching consequences without public debate on this matter.

This proposal, we presume, must be a follow-up to the suggestion by the former Lord President, Tun Abdul Hamid Omar, in April last year that trials by jury should be scrapped for murder cases.

Amendments to the judicial system such as abolishing juries, assessors and preliminary hearings are important and crucial issues which affect the lives of the ordinary Malaysians and, therefore, should be debated by the general public before they are presented to Parliament.

For the Law Minister, Datuk Syed Hamid Albar, to say that ordinary people who sit on the jury would be confused with the question of fact and law is tantamount to ridiculing their intelligence.

Do we select any Tom, Dick and Harry as jurors or is there a set criterion for such selection? After all, common sense should dictate that potential jurors should be educated enough and possess sufficient intelligence to differentiate between right and wrong and have full control of their faculties to follow the case.

It is interesting to note that the Minister of Law had not quoted any specific cases to support his notion that jurors and assessors had encountered difficulty in differentiating between facts and law. The Malaysian public has a right to know as to the number of specific cases in which verdicts were not reached because of this so-called problem.

The process of law should not be sacrificed at the altar of expediency. It is dangerous to expedite the process of administering law at the expense of justice.

**P Ramakrishnan**  
President

16 December 1994

### **MAKE SELF SUFFICIENCY IN FOOD PRODUCTION AN OVERRIDING PRIORITY**

Aliran welcomes the federal government's decision to give more attention to agricultural activities, especially food production. Aliran has long advocated such a move to check inflationary trends and prevent food shortages.

Now that the federal government is putting added emphasis on food, Aliran hopes that it will ensure that Malaysia becomes self-sufficient in four basic foodstuffs: rice, vegetables, fruits and fish. This should become an overriding national priority.

Indeed, rice production should be stepped up immediately if we are not to become dependent on imports which will make us vulnerable in times of world-wide shortage. The government should provide effective fertilisers, high-yielding grain, modern machinery and easy access to credit facilities to the poorer farmers.

The last thing it should be doing is taking away land from rice farmers for a tiger prawn cultivation project of all things.

**P Ramakrishnan**  
*President*

23 February 1995

*(The above statement did not appear in the mainstream media)*

### **GIVE POLITICAL PARTIES AIR-TIME OVER TELEVISION**

#### **Allocation of radio and television air-time to the various parties should be in proportion to the total votes obtained by each party in the last general election**

Aliran is disappointed that the government will not give political parties any air-time over television in the run-up to the election. Although they will be given the opportunity to broadcast their views over radio, it is television that has a greater impact on the electorate.

Aliran wishes to remind the Barisan Nasional that it does not own RTM. In previous elections, we have seen how the ruling coalition abused national television by highlighting the Barisan's campaign while ignoring or running down opposition parties. The Election Commission, if it is truly independent, should not allow this to happen.

Allocation of radio and television air-time to the various parties should be in proportion to the total votes obtained by each party in the last general election - which would be more representative of the level of public support it enjoys - instead of basing on the number of seats each party holds in parliament.

**Anil Netto**  
*Exco Member*

23 February 1995

*(The above statement did not appear in the mainstream media)*

### **LRT SHOULD BE DISABLED-FRIENDLY**

#### **If 18 seconds is not long enough, lengthen the stoppage time then!**

Aliran finds the explanation given by the CEO of Sistem Transit Aliran Ringan Sdn Bhd on the move to discourage the disabled from using the LRT totally unacceptable and repugnant.

The CEO Zainal Abdul Ghani said: "18 seconds is not long enough (at each stop) to make sure a wheelchair person is safely strapped in." If 18 seconds is not long enough, lengthen the stoppage time then! A few extra seconds at each station is not going to kill the LRT system and incur massive losses for the company. The other reasons he and his colleagues gave for not considering the disabled are equally pathetic.

Zainal will do well to study how other cities have successfully catered to the needs of the disabled. What kind of caring society are we if we do not look after the interests of *all* sections of the population?

**Gan Kong Hwee**  
*Executive Committee Member*

23 February 1995

*(The above statement did not appear in the mainstream media)*

Lapan Utan Estate:

## THE STRUGGLE FOR HOUSING

Unless something is urgently undertaken to solve the issues of housing and fair and just compensation, this problem will continue to be a nightmare for estate workers who are dismissed from their work and displaced from their homes. THOLILALIYIN THOLAR reports the plight of Lapan Utan Estate workers, the latest victims of "progress".

On 13 February 1995, some 60 workers from various estates in Selangor gathered at the Wisma KOSAS in Kuala Lumpur. These workers gathered in order to express their solidarity with the workers of Lapan Utan Estate. After a peaceful picket, they handed a memorandum to the Chairman of KOSAS urging KOSAS to help find a solution to the plight of the workers of Lapan Utan Estate.

### BACKGROUND

Lapan Utan Estate is an oil palm estate situated in the Mukim of Api-Api in Kuala Selangor. It had been owned by the National Multi-Purpose Co-Operative Society Ltd (NMPCS) since 1969.

On 1st September 1994 the workers of Lapan Utan Estate were served with termination notices by their employer NMPCS and told that they would have to vacate the estate quarters by 30 November 1994 as the estate had

been sold to Koperasi Serbaguna Anak-Anak Selangor (KOSAS).

After the serving of the termination notices, it appears the NMPCS informed the workers that besides their statutory termination benefits they would also receive an additional RM300 per year of service, if they vacated their homes by 30 November 1994 and gave a written undertaking that they would make no claim for alternative housing.

The requests of the workers of Lapan Utan Estate that the houses, that they are presently residing in be sold to them or that they be provided with alternative housing was categorically rejected by the NMPCS.

The workers of Lapan Utan Estate were surprised and shocked at the turn of events. They claimed that they had been promised housing by the NMPCS and that the NMPCS had in fact recorded such promises in the NMPCS Annual Reports. In the circumstances the workers decided that they would not vacate their estate quarters but rather stay on until the NMPCS makes good on its promise.

### DISRUPTION OF WATER SUPPLY

On 21 December 1994, water supply to workers residing in Lapan Utan Estate was disconnected. This unwarranted and arbitrary action was apparently instituted in order to put pressure on the workers and force them to vacate their estate quarters. The work-

ers, however, were not cowed; they decided to challenge this high-handed act by initiating court action.

On 27 December 1994, the workers of Lapan Utan Estate, with the support of the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) obtained an ex-parte order in the High Court of Shah Alam against both NMPCS and KOSAS. NMPCS and KOSAS, were ordered to immediately take action to reconnect the water supply for the workers of Lapan Utan Estate and to desist from any interference with the water supply or any other amenity being enjoyed by the workers. As a result of this ex-parte order, the water supply for the workers of Lapan Utan Estate was resumed on 4 January 1995.

The NMPCS and KOSAS, however, have both decided to challenge the ex-parte order granted to the workers and hearings on these applications are presently underway at the High Court in Shah Alam.

### OTHER ACTIONS

On 22 December 1994 the workers of Lapan Utan Estate, who are also members of the NMPCS, referred their dispute with the NMPCS to the Pengarah, Jabatan Pembangunan Koperasi. The workers are asking permission from the Pengarah that their dispute with the NMPCS over the issue of the promised housing be referred to the High Court.

The workers in their request for reference of their dispute to the High Court drew the attention of the Pengarah to the 1987 Annual Report of the NMPCS in which it was stated that a Syarikat Iver Enterprise, had already commenced preliminary work on the housing project, on a

42 acre site in Lapan Utan Estate and that both workers in Lapan Utan Estate and others had made applications for such housing.

The workers further referred to an offer letter dated 16 February 1990, from Mr G Perumal, the then Executive Chairman of the NMPCS, in which the workers were informed that the NMPCS had decided to sell the existing houses in the estate to the workers.

It was in the light of these facts, and documented promises, that the workers, apart from referring the dispute to the Pengarah, Jabatan Pembangunan Koperasi, have also lodged caveats against the three lots of land that make up Lapan Utan Estate.

#### **SELANGOR STATE EXCO POLICY**

A worker whose services are terminated, is entitled by law to lay-off and termination benefits. These benefits are however minimal. The law states that a worker who has more than 5 years of service will be entitled to termination benefits amounting to 20 days' wages per year of service. Thus a worker in Lapan Utan Estate who has 25 years of service would only be entitled to some RM5,000 in lay-off and termination benefits.

A plantation worker whose service is terminated, would receive the same rate of termination benefits as a factory worker, despite the fact that when a plantation worker is terminated, he loses not just his job but his place of abode as well.

It appears that a plantation worker who is displaced as a result of an estate being sold is not legally entitled to alternative housing or land. But in the case of Selangor, however, the Selangor State Executive Council in 1991 formulated a policy which stipulated that workers who are displaced as a result of an estate

being sold for development should be provided with either alternative housing or land.

This Selangor State Exco policy regarding alternative housing for plantation workers has been much touted by members of the Selangor State Executive Council, particularly so over the last few years when numerous estates in Selangor have been sold for purposes of "development".

Our observation of the sale of Lapan Utan Estate and other estates in Selangor, however has convinced us that there is no mechanism in Selangor for the implementation of such a policy!

What plantation workers truly require is legislation that will ensure that the workers will receive adequate compensation and be provided with either alternative housing or land when an estate is sold for development. The policy of the Selangor State Executive Council with regard to the displacement of plantation workers is certainly praiseworthy.

#### **THE CASE OF LAPAN UTAN ESTATE**

In the case of Lapan Utan Estate it appears quite certain that many promises for housing have in fact been made to the workers. This would thus mean that in addition to what is provided for in law, the workers in Lapan Utan Estate have also a legal and legitimate right to alternative housing.

It is with this in mind that we hope the Board of Directors of the NMPCS will see fit to do the right

***Noble sentiments without provisions for their legal enforcement must remain a sterile intention without any tangible benefits.***

thing. In addition to the payment of RM300 per year of service to the workers of Lapan Utan Estate, we believe that the NMPCS should also respond positively to the requests of the workers for housing by either

- (i) arranging for alternative housing, or
- (ii) providing free lots for this purpose.

Unfortunately, the Selangor Executive Council policy does not have legal provisions to compel estate owners to live up to this requirement. Noble sentiments without provisions for their legal enforcement must remain a sterile intention without any tangible benefits.

It is important to point out here that since the number of workers in Lapan Utan Estate is small, the allocation of 2 acres out of 350 acres of land in Lapan Utan Estate would be more than sufficient to provide all the workers of Lapan Utan Estate with free lots on which they can build their own houses.

The Selangor State Government should also intervene in this dispute and take all necessary steps in accordance with its own state policy to ensure that the workers of Lapan Utan Estate are not displaced without any place to go to. ♦



◁ Estate workers picketing for housing.



### HIGHWAY DUMMIES

An advertisement for a sports-car - of a rather unremarkable and unoriginal design at that - ran onto hot tar shortly after it rolled out. The ad was considered sexist and an insult to women. The advertisers had an ex-beauty queen declaring quite unequivocally that she didn't care what a man looked like or what he was, but she was available as long as the bloke drove a Bufori.

Hmm ... and they want us to believe that beauty queens are not completely without brains. Much as one understands that the model was just doing her job, one has to admit that the lines she had to mutter on the ad merely reinforced the public impression of models as, ... well, dummies. Worse still, her indiscriminating taste of men somehow suggests that she will not be averse to zooming off into the sunset (and a speeding ticket) in a Bufori with some sleazy mobster. After all, she did say she was prepared to go out with any kind of chap.

Groups have rightly criticised the advertising agency which came up with this dubious ad for being so bankrupt of ideas that it has to exploit women to sell a product. Worse, the approach is not even original. Some people have found the product itself offensive. They say it is elitist and feeds mainly well-heeled fantasies. And it is yet another instance of the increasingly materialistic road that our market economy is taking us.

The controversial ad also went to show how utterly confused the censors are about what is proper or improper for public consumption. About the only thing the censors seem sure about is that kissing and

bedroom scenes and the F-word are absolute no-no's. But they are at quite a loss when it comes to areas such as violence and horror or even programmes that propagate sexism.

For instance, the censors' idea of horror has been extended to the perfectly innocent radio programme *Midnight Magic* hosted by Patrick Teoh. Frankly, if the censors should ever think of consulting us, the horror category should extend to those boria clips that come on (too often) to fill the time in between programmes.

Boria stems from the street culture of the earlier part of this century and was noted for its gaiety and even wit. But the RTM version is completely devoid of any such characteristics. The presentation is monotonous, the lyrics unimaginative. But what irks most is its crude propagandism, particularly the latest segment. Propaganda on RTM, we understand, is unavoidable. But please, may we have it in less mindless and boring forms?

In fact, the most recent frenzy to sanitise the TV channels apparently stems less from a renewed moral conscience than a guilty conscience on the part of Tok Mat. He appeared particularly stung by the PM's latest remarks on the violence and horror that has continued to permeate the TV channels despite repeated instructions to clean up. It appears that RTM is the victim of the old adage, money is the root of all evil. It has been torn between the desire to reap revenue from advertisers (who tend to dictate the type of shows screened) and inculcate healthy viewing habits.

### OLD TIGER

Poor Ghafar! He found himself celebrating his 70th birthday with, guess who? The MCA. His own chaps from UMNO Baru were too busy (probably jostling to be candidates in the general election) to remember his seventh decade. Anyway, credit ought to go to the MCA for remembering what Ghafar did for the party.

As for UMNO Baru, it appears as though birthdays are only worth celebrating if the birthday boy or girl is in a position to dish out favours, which may explain why Dr M gets more birthday cakes each year than he can cut. It boils down to *ampu-bodek*.

And poor Ghafar is obviously still smarting over the way his own party had discarded him like a piece of old furniture given the way he went on and on

about how age ought not to be a problem in serving the rakyat. (Tell that to UMNO Baru members in Terengganu who are now preparing to boot out their Menteri Besar because he has overstayed his welcome). He also said he would rather be a tiger for a day than a goat for 100 years. Too bad he was politically mauled by a younger and much more ferocious tiger.

### **GREAT MAIL ROBBERY**

More promises from Pos Malaysia. It has signed an MOU with New Zealand Post Limited to help them draw up a comprehensive postal modernisation programme service aimed at improving its services. There are two conclusions to be drawn from here. The first is that it sounds expensive and we hope the costs will not be passed on to consumers.

Secondly, this appears to be an admission on the part of Pos Malaysia that all is not well with this privatised body despite its constant denials and '*buat-tak-tahu*' in the face of complaints from the public.

Privatisation, in the case of Pos Malaysia, has meant a change from one hopeless monopoly to another. It looks like the pigeon depicted in Pos Malaysia's logo has lost its way. And frankly, it is difficult to measure efficiency in the absence of competition.

On the bright side, an effective case of privatisation has been in the broadcasting sector, specifically TV and radio services. For decades since Independence, RTM had gone on in more or less the same boorish fashion because it enjoyed a monopoly audience although the enjoyment was clearly not mutual. But since the advent of TV3 and new radio channels, RTM has radically amended its ways and attitude in order to hang on to a portion of its old audience and of course, advertisers and revenue.

### **GOVERNMENT FATTIES**

Well, well, well, it seems that more than a third of civil servants are overweight. In fact, eight per cent of them even fall under the obese category. One can only speculate on the cause of their corpulence. Apart from an unhealthy diet and sheer over-eating, it is likely that they are under-worked and taking far too many tea/coffee breaks for their own good.

It would not be surprising too to find that among the fatties are those in the police force. Those

frequently stuck in KL's traffic jams would have noticed that at least two or three out of every 10 traffic policemen on the road possess bodies that appear to be screaming to break out of the tight uniforms.

As for policemen, there seem to be more fat policemen than thin ones. They definitely do not look fit enough to tackle the baddies. It makes one wonder whether the policemen of today have been reduced to desk jobs rather than the more active image that we have of them. In fact, the fat has spread to even the top police officials - we shall not name names since some of them can be awfully sensitive. But if they are keen to find out, they can either look into a full-length mirror or climb onto the scales.

### **VISIT MALAYSIA YEAR**

If not for anything else, the runaway boy from Britain has certainly added lustre and gusto to the Visit Malaysia Year campaign. Imagine, even British children are running off to visit our country! But while the Tourist Development Authority is patting itself on the back, the Immigration Department deserves a slap or two in the face.

It is inconceivable how this 14-year-old boy could have been mistaken for a 59-old-man. The immigration chap on duty must have been blind or careless or both. Alternatively, it could be a case of an old disease known as white-is-better. An arrivee from some Third World country would have had his or her passport scrutinised more closely than say a white man or woman.

The disease, according to regular Malaysian travellers, also afflicts certain employees of our national airline. It seems, MAS stewardesses and stewards adopt a different attitude towards foreigners (usually white ones) as opposed to their own Malaysian passengers. It's either a case of poor training on the part of MAS or a neo-colonial hang-up.

### **BAPA MONEY POLITICS**

There is now a proposal to turn the house of the late Tun Datu Mustapha into a museum. The idea was aired by an UMNO Baru strongman in Sabah who is said to have been a henchman of Mustapha during one of the most traumatic period of the Pairin

administration. The proposed museum would contain exhibits demonstrating Mustapha's contributions to the state.

We hope the museum will tell the honest truth instead of glossing over the ugly parts and highlighting only the good parts as has become a trend when it comes to documenting history in this country.

Mustapha was no saint and there ought not be any hypocritical attempts to paint a glowing halo around his memory just because he has gone to meet his maker.

### NEPOTISM

Dr M was visibly upset when he came on TV denying that he owned any land in Langkawi. Poor man, after all he has done in pushing Langkawi to the forefront of international tourism, he is now accused of harbouring self-interest. Really, those who make such accusations ought to furnish proof instead of shooting the air. On the other hand, we wish he could have made the same fervent denial regarding the allocation of 1.5 million units of Leader Universal shares to his son Mirzan Mahathir.

The silence on the part of those ministers whose relatives benefited from this special shares allocation through the Ministry of International Trade and Industry has been deafening. But the Deputy Prime Minister got very angry recently when a local reporter persisted in asking him about the issue. It is ironic that those implicated are the ones showing their temper. One would think that the angry people would be the rakyat, especially the group in whose names such shares are being dished out.

### JUNKETS

Looks like the successor to Rahim Tamby Chik learns quickly. He has announced that the state government will be embarking on five trade missions (read junkets) this year to Europe, the US, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Apparently, the order that the wooing of foreign investors should be coordinated by the federal government has gone into one ear and out the next. Bon voyage, Mr Chief Minister! And welcome onto the gravy train!

### IN GOD'S NAME

Dabbling in the stock market to the tune of RM2

million, bullying innocent people and zooming around in Pajeros with fancy number plates. These are activities that one would associate with arrogant, well-heeled yuppies with material things on their minds. But no, we are talking about the Religious Affairs Department.

First, the Federal Territory branch's misadventure into the stock market came to light when the remisier made off with the cash. The case is now pending in court. Then in Selangor, the department's Badar body, a sort of 'privatised' enforcement group fighting vice among Muslims descended into vice themselves. Seven of them were arrested by the police for extortion.

As for the Pajeros, it appeared that a fleet of nine green and silver Pajeros was purchased by the Johor branch to the tune of RM630,000. The money is believed to have come from the Baitulmal Fund. The trouble here is that there are strict rules governing the use of the Baitulmal Fund which is built on money that Muslims contribute in the form of *zakat* or money from unclaimed inheritances and revenue from property belonging to state religious council.

The fund is supposed to be used for specific religious activities and purposes and buying luxury cars for the use of the staff is definitely not one of them, not even if the vehicles are used to transport officials on *dakwah* missions. To make matters worse, all the vehicles had fancy number plates that would normally be available through bidding. Has materialism crept up on a body that is supposed to look after the spiritual needs of Muslims?

The ACA, we are told, is diligently investigating the above case just as it is so studiously combing through the rather irregular purchase of TV and karaoke sets by the Civil Aviation Department. Somehow, the ACA is usually very brave and gungho when it comes to small fish like these, but less so when it involves bigger fish in judicial robes.

For instance, it seems to find it normal that certain judges are able to acquire stupendous wealth far beyond what their accumulated salary can account for. Can we be blamed for thinking that the ACA only fishes in small ponds and is afraid to venture beyond into deep waters?

While some do fishy things in the name of God,

others do it in the name of the Prime Minister. It appears that some UMNO Baru members are going around saying that they have the blessings of the PM to stand in this or that seat. Tok Mat, the source of this little tidbit, said members who went around doing this would only end up splitting the party.

One suspects that his peeved tone may have been caused by the fact that one of those making such claims must have announced that he was going to stand in Tok Mat's seat. Anyway, given the propensity of RTM for distortion, we have every reason to doubt whatever comes from the mouth of the Umno secretary-general.

#### **REPRESENTATIVES OF THE SELF**

The Menteri Besar of Terengganu, when interviewed on Wawancara (at best, it is a well-rehearsed question-and-answer programme) said that in politics, one should not ask for position. Little wonder then, that UMNO Baru members in the state are asking him to step down. He is obviously out of touch with the aspirations of the younger and aspiring generation of UMNO Baru. People in his time may have actually joined politics to serve society but who in the world thinks like that anymore? The material rewards of being in politics are so vast that people have been driven to commit murder and more recently, to die for it.

#### **OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND**

KL's police have until Dec 31 to clear the city of some 16,000 drug addicts. The order came from the IGP who appears to have been greatly encouraged by the way his men have managed to clear the notorious Chow Kit area of "living zombies". The move will be good for KL except for one disquieting thought. Where have all these living dead gone off to? Surely they have not evaporated into thin air.

It is likely they have moved on to new haunts. In other words, they have gone off to create new problems in other areas which are out of sight (and therefore, out of the mind) of the IGP. Frankly, this bull-doing method of the police leaves much to be desired. It is little more than transferring a problem from one spot to another. The upshot of it all is that the dadah addicts are still there. Thus, the IGP should not behave as though he has solved the dadah problems of KL.

#### **SEX AND POLITICS**

UMNO Baru Kelantan has been going to town on

the Mohd Sabu issue. For the first time in years, Kelantanese are apparently streaming to attend UMNO Baru ceramahs without having to be paid to do so. It seems that lots of sordid and snide remarks were made about hotel rooms, etc. UMNO Baru politicians ought not to forget that they have their own sex-crazed skeletons in the cupboard.

The details revealed and speculated about this case at these ceramahs are such that we cannot reproduce them without violating the rules on VHS! That all these shabby methods are being employed to gain votes shows how desperate both sides are to appear holier than the other.

Meanwhile, UMNO Baru's attempt to bully PAS to drop the word 'Islam' from its name appears to have backfired in the former's face like one of those gooey pies that the Three Stooges are so fond of. PAS is now going about saying that this shows how un-Islamic UMNO Baru has become. It's true that PAS is just another political party, but frankly, a party that has so cunningly dropped the word Baru from its name should not be so bossy and presumptuous about the names that others choose to adopt. Indeed, the rivalry between these two Malay-based parties has grown quite ridiculous. Both are claiming to be more Islamic.

It is like a person claiming that he is more humble than anyone else. The actual voicing of such a claim itself repudiates the state of humility. True religiosity or spirituality need not be announced through loud speakers at the Putra World Trade Centre. It should be practised in ways that can be quietly noted down by the common man. Perhaps for a start, UMNO Baru politicians should distance themselves from money politics.

At a recent indoor rally at the PWTC, UMNO Baru members each received a booklet explaining that PAS places more emphasis on politics than religion. The intense offensive against PAS began at the last UMNO Baru general assembly and appears to have grown more and more hysterical. All this hype is linked to UMNO Baru's obsession to get back Kelantan and hang onto Terengganu whatever the costs.

Whatever, it is, the behaviour of both sides makes a mockery of the religious values that they claim to espouse.

- by NNP -

## CONFLICT

# RESIDENTS DEFEND THEIR LAND FROM KTM

*After being served with eviction notices by KTM 15 families moved out from their homes. Three brave families, however, stood their ground and discovered that KTM had no claim to the land. TAN JO HANN files their story.*

Seventy year old S Batumalai is a retired Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) worker who has been living in Sentul for the past four generations. He spent most of his savings including his EPF savings, close to RM20,000, to build his house in Kampung Chinatamby Chetty in Sentul, Kuala Lumpur.

His neighbour N Sellamani, now in her 60s is a 'kuih' seller at a nearby golf course. She is a red IC holder and was married to a Malaysian who died recently. For the past 25 years she has been living in a little wooden shack in Kampung Chinatamby.

Mary, a school teacher and her 9 siblings and other relatives have lived in this kampung ever since she was still a child.

### EVICITION NOTICES SERVED

Last September, all of them along with their neighbours were served with eviction notices by the

Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) because KTM claimed that they owned the land and wanted to construct some double track rail system related project there.

Following the eviction notice, all the families have moved out except for Batumalai and his wife, Sellamani and Mary's family. For those who had left, they have not only lost their permanent houses and land but from now onwards would have to pay a monthly rental of RM45 (in addition to water and electricity charges) for a small cramped unit in the *rumah panjang* community, where they are presently housed.

Furthermore this is only a temporary housing arrangement and evicted urban settlers are ultimately supposed to be resettled in

low cost housing costing between RM20,000-RM25,000 a unit.

In the case of Sellamani, she was straight away denied this temporary shelter based on the fact that she is a red IC holder and was living alone. As such, she was not entitled to such relief.

Mary and her family of 10 adults were only offered one unit of the *rumah panjang*, but it is quite evident that even big families with young children have problems with the space arrangement let alone a family of 10 adults. As such Mary has been pleading with the authorities to be given 2 units next to each other so that her family could still be together.

In the case of Batumalai and his wife who have actually poured most of their life savings into their present house, leaving all the memories of the past 80 years of living there would be a very painful and heart-wrenching experience. They decided to make a stand and despite their home being torn down three times by the DBKL, they had persistently rebuilt it each time and



Batumalai and his family had lived here for four generations.

stayed on to defend their home.

Batumalai also claimed that the land grant was actually given to him many years ago by the real owner, but it was burnt in a fire together with his house in the 1980s. As such today he cannot ascertain his ownership of the land.

All they are asking for is a *rumah panjang* unit for Sellamani; two units for Mary's family and adequate compensation for Batumalai's loss of property in the event of being evicted from their premises in Kampung Chinatamby.

#### **NO MONETARY COMPENSATION**

In general, no monetary compensation was offered and no negotiation process was initiated by KTM. In fact, the DBKL with the sanction of KTM had even tried to forcibly evict these people on three occasions.

But each time, Mary and Sellamani, and Batumalai, together with some concerned neighbours and friends, had managed successfully to ward off the destructive efforts of the unthinking DBKL

enforcement officers.

Finally the showdown came on January 7 1995 when 20 DBKL officers accompanied by 10 police officers, a band of KTM officials and a bulldozer tried to clear the area of the remaining three houses.

But the residents were ready for this onslaught as they stood between their homes and the menacing bulldozer and enforcement officers. With the support of about 30 concerned friends from several neighbouring kampungs, and concerned organisations, they managed to halt the operations.

Through a tedious process of pressing for dialogue with the KTM officials, the director of the Electrical Multiple Unit (EMU) project, Mr Satyamoorthy finally visited the area in an attempt to resolve the matter.

The KTM official's visit was actually a positive step forward for the people compared to the heated and unfruitful exchanges of the past with other KTM bureaucrats and uncaring DBKL enforcement officers.



Bulldozer, enforcement officers, KTM officials and the police getting ready for demolition work.

While pressing the authorities to look into their demands, the people had also begun to question even KTM's ownership of the land.

Satyamoorthy was evidently uninformed of the status of the land where Kampung Chinatamby stood on and was also unclear whether KTM had even planned any project on the site. But he admitted that the land status should be determined first before any negotiations could continue.

#### **NO LEGAL BASIS FOR KTM**

But meanwhile the residents had initiated a land search and it had revealed very interesting results, that their kampung was actually built on private land, belonging to a Mr Mudaligi Geogina Paaris.

At this juncture, after consulting their lawyer, Batumalai, Sellamani and Mary immediately filed for damages from KTM for the harassment, mental anguish and loss of wages as the residents had to sometimes take unpaid leave to defend their houses.

Some weeks later in a letter dated January 24, Mr Zukifli bin Ibrahim, Deputy Director of the Enforcement unit of DBKL wrote to the residents' lawyer claiming that the land on which the residents are staying is government land reserved for KTM Berhad.

This new turn of events must have come as a shock. Consequently, KTM and DBKL had to back off as the true owners of the land is yet to be officially determined.

If indeed the land is privately owned, then KTM and DBKL have no choice but to recognise the



Mr. Satya Moorthy, Director of the EMU project of KTM, finally visited the area.

people's right to remain on the land. But for the other 15 families whose homes were destroyed and were forced to move out, their eviction was indeed a gross violation of their rights. They were evicted illegally and both KTM and DBKL have conducted themselves without any legal basis in this affair.

KTM had actually tried to fool the people by adopting strong arm tactics by using the police and DBKL to forcibly and illegally evict the people from their homes.

If not for the firm resistance of the people and support from concerned neighbours and caring friends, they would have already lost their homes and would have been compelled to move into the horrible *rumah panjang*. As for Sellamani, she would have been forced to sleep on the streets in Sentul.

But the authorities have since then remained very silent about the ambiguous situation. They have not even verbally apologised to the people for the unnecessary harassment, unjustified threats of eviction and bullying attitude displayed by the KTM officials and DBKL enforcement officers.

Kampung Chinatamby Chetty is a landmark case where the people's perseverance for decent lives and the right to a proper home, has at least culminated in some form of victory even if it may be shortlived.

#### STILL WORRIED

Today the people are still worried that this new turn of events would probably prompt the KTM to manipulate the situation and somehow acquire the land through the Land Acquisition Act or through

some other enactment which would eventually chase the people off the land.

KTM has to be accountable to the general public especially the communities they have already evicted and are going to evict in the future while implementing the double tracking project.

More communities like that of Kampung Chinatamby will have to fight for their rights and continue to press the relevant authorities to properly and accurately establish the real ownership of the land before it is arbitrarily claimed by KTM and thereby forcing the residents out of their homes and robbing them of a life that they had enjoyed for decades. ♦

*\* Tan Jo Hann is a freelance journalist and also a member of PERMAS (Persatuan Masyarakat Selangor dan Wilayah Persekutuan), an organisation working with urban poor communities in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor.*



Concerned neighbours and caring friends managed to halt the demolition operation.

# LOVE, LAUGHTER AND LIFE IN A CROATIAN REFUGEE CAMP

## — A Malaysian Volunteer

Last November, I had the opportunity to live and work in a refugee camp for Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats in Pula, Croatia. The organisation I volunteered with was a Croatian grassroots relief non-governmental organisation called "Suncokret". Suncokret has been working in refugee camps in Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia since the start of the Balkan conflict and largely depends on the contributions of self-financed volunteers. The refugee camp I worked in was called Kamenjak and was one of the biggest in Pula.

I guess by some standards the refugees in Kamenjak fared quite well - definitely better than the Cambodian refugees in the Sungai Besi and Hong Kong camps. At least they are not guarded by armed men and cut-off from the rest of "civilization" by barbed wire fences. Besides their freedom of movement, they had basic amenities like in-door toilets and showers. The camp even had 5 washing machines - past tense, none of them were working and there is little hope of them being fixed in the near future. The camp also had hot water - but as the women were constantly doing their families' laundry, they had to cope with having cold showers. Needless to say the men, for some mysterious reason, never had this problem.

### AMAZING WOMEN

The first thing I must say about the people in the camp is that rather than resign themselves to their present fate, most of the people I knew made every effort to get on with their lives and to overcome the privations and hardships they faced. In this respect the women in the camp were simply amazing. Many of them were on their own, their husbands being in Bosnia. They had to fend for themselves and their children single-handedly. The women were not only responsible for giving their children some sense of security but they were crucial to the survival of the camp. In addition to their parental and household chores, they worked in the kitchen, bakery, the sewing room and ensured the general cleanliness of the camp.

To me, the camp seemed to be so full of life - not just in terms of activities organised by the volunteers but also in the sense that the people around, primarily the women, were always busy doing something. I'm sure they clean/wash the floors every couple of hours - the times I've nearly broken my neck coming down those stairs ... The men, unable to find work in Pula, would sit and chat in groups or play chess in the courtyard. The children, naturally, were all over the camp - playing in the foyers, corridors and courtyard. The camp was also full of life in the sense of people's hopes of starting life anew either when they return to Bosnia or when/if they migrate to Canada, the USA or elsewhere.

However, throughout my stay in Kamenjak I found that there



Invalids Centre Kamenjak, Pula. Picture of the courtyard between the 1st and 2nd (Invalids) Building.

was so much more work to be done and so many different needs that needed to be seen to. I soon learned from my work with the invalids that they had emotional needs that were just as vital to their overall well-being as their physical needs. Helping with physiotherapy and giving massage was only part of the work - they needed a lot of love, attention, support and understanding. The only way of fulfilling these needs was by spending time with them and giving them companionship.

### **ONE DOCTOR FOR 1,000 REFUGEES**

In a sense, the plight of the invalids was really not too different from that of elderly and bed-ridden people everywhere. Their health condition made them "invisible" members of the community, as they were unable to mingle freely with the rest of the camp. Most of the invalids I worked with were in constant pain, a few urgently needed operations and some of them were on their own. Although they are "taken care of" in the camp - it is the barest minimum care for people in their condition. One must also bear in mind that there is only one doctor available for the 1,000 odd refugees and one sister-in-charge of meeting the basic needs of all the invalids. Personally, I could not decide which was the worst aspect of their plight - the loss of their families, homes / belongings, their health, their personal dignity or their extreme sense of isolation and sheer helplessness.

The children on the whole were sweet. Naturally, there were some mischievous ones too. It is quite funny but I soon figured out that

if a child was aggressive towards you - kicks or hits you for no apparent reason, the best way of dealing with them is to hug or kiss them. Either they will return the affection or they will run a mile away from you. One of the saddest things about my stay in the camp was knowing that quite a few of the kids who came up to Suncograd were being abused in the camp. Sometimes children would show up with bad bruises/burn marks from cigarettes, and there was little the volunteers could do, apart from being gentle with them. At times things would get difficult when the children we suspected of being abused, in turn, became aggressive/violent towards other children. The volunteers also couldn't help but notice that the children who were most violent were the ones who wore the most bruises.

### **STRENGTH AND DETERMINATION**

Despite all the suffering and misery the refugees have gone and are still going through, they have managed with their strength and determination to somehow rise above it all. They do not allow their pain to dominate their lives - thus, they can see beyond their immediate predicament and appreciate the small joys in life, without which there could be no hope. One thing that really struck me about them was their eagerness to talk to me, not only about themselves and their families but also about myself, my family and country. Another wonderful thing about the refugees was their capacity to give and share what precious little they had - endless cups of industrial strength Bosanska kava (coffee), fruit, burek, sweets and even fire-crackers - lit and stuffed into your coat pocket, by some of the

pyromaniacally inclined children.

Apart from the warmth and hospitality of the refugees, I have the utmost respect and admiration for them because they did not succumb to the madness that has fuelled the Balkan conflict. Relations between the Bosnian Muslim and Bosnian Croat (Catholic) refugees were peaceful and harmonious. In fact, there was a marked absence of overt religious tension within the camp. The camp was not segregated in any way.

**Ever so often I would discover that one of my refugee friends' mother or father was a Serb or Bosnian Croat (Catholic) and the other parent a Bosnian Muslim.**

Personally speaking, the hardest thing for me to reconcile about the Balkan crisis was how it could have erupted and manifested itself in the way that it did. The reason why I feel this way is because so many of the people I met there had Serb, Croatian and Muslim relatives. Ever so often I would discover that one of my refugee friends' mother or father was a Serb or Bosnian Croat (Catholic) and the other parent a Bosnian Muslim.

The people there seemed to have been so well integrated, particularly through inter-marriages, that one simply cannot make sense of what has happened. My refugee friends tend to feel the same way too. Most of them

had led everyday, normal lives before the crisis blew up and would never have been able to picture themselves in a refugee camp, let alone the horrors of a Serbian concentration camp.

With all the betrayals and atrocities committed against them, I wonder how they find the strength and will to persevere and

to still have hope and faith in the human race. But they do - and more than that, despite their pain - they continue to live, love and laugh.

Thus, I would like to end this article with an appeal to anyone who has any spare clothes, wool for crochet/embroidery, basic medical supplies and toiletries - e.g. sterile gloves, incontinence

napkins, baby oil/powder etc., glue, scissors, sticky tape and old English or German textbooks to contact me (Ms Sukanya Tel: 03-7550441). Alternatively, if anyone would be so kind as to offer sponsorship of the camp ... Well, whatever it is you can do and whatever it is you are able to spare, the people of Kamenjak would be most grateful to you. ♦



Su, Anna & Mato Lukic (Catholic) - Room 105



Rifat Agic (wheelchair) & the Husein family (Smijel, Sadika & Sadik Husein) (Muslim) - Room 105

**Muslims  
and  
Catholics  
lived  
amicably  
in the  
same  
room.**

## AN APPEAL

# ALIRAN *An Appeal for* needs a home *Aliran's Building Fund*

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**P. Ramakrishnan**  
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# WOMEN OF PEACE

*All her paths are peace*

by Michael Henderson  
Kumarian Press  
USA \$14.95, UK£6.95

In this book Michael Henderson presents an absolutely astounding collection of personalities of the highest integrity and with fascinating lives. These unusual people have two things in common: all are women and all have contributed towards peace and understanding.

The Dalai Lama wrote the introduction, which is filled with wisdom. He is convinced that it is women's role to act as harmonizers among people of all colours and creeds in all parts of the world, because people everywhere are basically the same.

Henderson introduces the reader to women from many countries, Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim, all of whom understand that without forgiveness and understanding there cannot be peace, and that without peace and understanding, friendship and love there cannot be a good life. Some of them were devoted to the idea of peace and tolerance from the beginning, some arrived at their creed after dramatic experiences, some found inspiration in the heroines of the past.

The first peacemaker introduced is Sushobha Barve, a high-caste Hindu who has devoted all her efforts to the reconciliation of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, since she was witness to Hindu cruelty towards two Sikhs who travelled

with her on a train. This event changed her life, her perspective and motivation. There is no question that she has decreased suffering and prevented many tragedies.

The moving story of Irene Laure puts many of us to shame. A Frenchwoman, who had good reasons to hate the Germans after the war and the occupation of part of France, found the strength to forgive the former enemies of her country, and to voice this loud and clear. Her example inspired others, both men and women.

Renee Pan, from Cambodia, gained experience of a functioning democracy in the United States. The turmoil and devastation caused by hatred in her luckless country was consequently even more unacceptable. She had lost her husband while fleeing her country, found asylum in Bangkok and then the United States. When she returned to Cambodia, she helped to organize the free elections and later, through the radio programmes she produced, advocated forgiveness and tolerance.

The story of Abeba Tesfagiorgis of Eritrea is more intriguing than any novel. Abeba actually faced a firing squad during the time her country was under Ethiopian domination. She was active in the resistance and later imprisoned. In 1991 her country won independence. She helped establish a Centre for Human Rights in Eritrea, was invaluable in the election preparations and, most important of all, taught people that they should try to establish normal

relations with their former enemies.

Shidzue Kato was born into an aristocratic Japanese family. Her marriage was arranged with her consent, but she had the good luck to marry an enlightened husband. Her greatest inspiration was Joan of Arc. She fought for birth control in Japan and her intelligence and active interest in public affairs won her a senator's chair.

Others featured in the book include Audrey Burton, an African American who has directed her efforts towards the improvement of corrective institutions; Dame Alice Wedega, of Papua New Guinea, who travelled the world preaching understanding and the rejection of hate; Saidie Patterson of Belfast, who recruited her countrywomen as peacemakers and harmonizers; Yukika Sohma of Japan, who awakened her country to the needs of refugees; women from South America, Burma, Israel and Egypt.

What is the common denominator? Knowledge of different cultures, tolerance, forgiveness, a progress from vision to action. Many found their strength through the experience of Caux and Moral Re-Armament. The stories are narrated without pathos, without any dramatization. Just the facts are presented - and facts without trimmings are impressive and inspiring. A book for those who have the vision and need inspiration for action. ♦

*Jara Moserova-Davidova  
Head of the Czech Commission  
for UNESCO in Prague*

**SOURCE:** For A Change  
Oct./Nov. 1994

# TRANSPORT MINISTRY SHOULD ACT, NOT JUST TALK

*Mounting expensive and impressive campaigns to educate the public on the importance of road safety without follow-up action is a waste of time, energy and money, observes FAN YEW TENG.*



**I**T CANNOT BE DENIED that the current television campaign on the dangers of drunken driving has caught the attention of a great number of Malaysians. The television campaign is well produced because it is realistic. We get the impression that we are getting a report straight from the scene of an accident.

The urgent task, however, is for the Transport Ministry to act firmly against people who consume alcoholic drinks and drive. The duty of the Transport Ministry and other relevant authorities like the police is to implement the law and implement it without fear or favour.

The Transport Ministry says it wants to wait until the message of the dangers of drunken driving has reached everyone before it acts. This is strange logic. Why wait? If the dangers of drunken driving are as serious as the authorities say they are, then it is urgent that the law against drunken driving be implemented strictly and immediately.

The dangers are real and urgent. Otherwise, why has the

***If the dangers of drunken driving are as serious as the authorities say they are, then it is urgent that the law against drunken driving be implemented strictly and immediately.***

Ministry decided to spend so much money on the media campaign? And it does not mean that action cannot be taken while the media campaign continues.

Organisations like the Automobile Association of Malaysia and the Federation of Malaysian Consumer Associations are right in saying that the authorities must impose random breath tests immediately to back up the government's anti-drink driving campaign.

Why wait and allow more innocent people to be killed on the roads? If necessary, the law against drunken driving should be made stiffer in order to impose a heavier penalties.

It seems that millions of ringgit had been spent on the purchase of breath analysers some time ago, for the purpose of checking on people who drink and drive. But this equipment has been gathering dust in some store-room, somewhere, instead of being put to good use. Why?

This is a waste of public money and very disappointing indeed. It should be rectified immediately.

At another level, but closely connected to the same problem of people who drink and drive, the authorities should keep a very strict eye on restaurants and pubs where beer, whisky, brandy and other strong drinks are served. For one thing, more pubs have been allowed to open. Moreover, some beer companies are also holding all sorts of competitions, including so-called beauty contests featuring scantily-dressed girls and young women. All this will only encourage more people - especially young people - to drink. And among these people who drink, some will be irresponsible enough to drive after drinking heavily.

### WHO IS CAR-POOLING?

For many months, some time ago, the Transport Ministry carried out a media campaign on car-pooling. Again, the aim was good. It was to educate the people

that it would make sense to car-pool so that our roads, especially in the cities, would not be so congested and polluted.

However, it is disappointing that the authorities have not followed up this media campaign on car-pooling with action. After months of telling the public about the need to share their cars to go to work and to come home, and after spending more than RM11 million on the media campaign, the Transport Ministry said in Parliament recently that car-pooling would not be implemented until alternative modes of public transport were found.

Now, this explanation is highly illogical. We were led to believe, in the first place, that car-pooling itself was meant to be an alternative mode of transport, if not the main alternative mode.

One would have thought that the authorities were already planning seriously how to implement car-pooling before and during the media campaign. One would have thought that the Transport Ministry in particular, with help from the traffic police, would have drawn up elaborate and detailed plans to implement a scheme which they told the public was very necessary.

*After months of telling the public about the need to share their cars to go to work and to come home, and after spending more than RM11 million on the media campaign, the Transport Ministry said in Parliament recently that car-pooling would not be implemented until alternative modes of public transport were found.*

But no, there was no follow-up implementation of a well-intentioned idea. What a pity indeed. Without any follow-up implementation, it seems to me that only the media agency which was given the contract to design and broadcast the campaign had benefited handsomely from the money spent.

#### **WHAT ABOUT DRIVING WITH HANDPHONES?**

More than a year ago Transport Minister Dr Ling Liong Sik promised to announce the ban on drivers using handphones. That promise was made after a couple of earlier postponements on the matter. But, until now, no announcement has been made. Why?

This long silence is not only strange but also inefficient. Has the Minister clearly forgotten it, or is he thinking of another media campaign without back-up implementation? Or is he being too soft to handphone companies?

This is a serious matter that should have been resolved long ago. People who drive and use handphones at the same time are a danger not only to themselves but also to other drivers, motorcyclists, bikers and pedestrians.

A person who drives must concentrate 100 per cent on the road, not on the person he is talking to on the handphone or the interesting or argumentative conversation he is having. So, why the delay?

The Transport Minister should wake up to his responsibilities. His job is not just talking about road safety or transport safety. He also has to ensure that rules and regulations on safety are obeyed and implemented by everybody concerned.

***People who drive and use handphones at the same time are a danger not only to themselves but also to other drivers, motorcyclists, bikers and pedestrians.***



**DR. LING:** Yet to announce the ban on drivers using handphones

Mounting expensive media campaigns to educate the public about the importance of road safety without follow-up action is a waste of time, energy and money.

And let's face it, the long tenure of Ling as Transport Minister has not been exactly inspiring. Sure, the train service seems to have improved, but road accidents and deaths have increased. And the many fires and other serious lapses of safety at the Subang International Airport are still far from satisfactorily explained.

Last but not least, too many drivers on the road still have 'Kopi-O' licences. They drive recklessly, posing a danger to all others, appearing unaware of basic traffic rules. It goes for a lot of our young motor-cyclists as well. Surprise checks by the Anti-Corruption Agency should be conducted on the JPJ and the testers. ♦

## The Kerpan Controversy:

# Prawn profits and human dignity

Some 33 landowners, including 10 women, were arrested in early January this year for trying to defend their land rights. They had obstructed the developers of the Kerpan tiger prawn project in Kedah from bringing in heavy machinery to bulldoze, quite literally, their way through. Certain government leaders and some local mainstream media dismissed this as the antics of a bunch of trouble makers who couldn't and didn't appreciate the good intentions of the state government to help develop the people and society in general.

The multi-million ringgit project is being undertaken by Samak Aquaculture Sdn Bhd, a joint venture between Saudi Arabian businessmen, the Kedah State government and interested farmers. Similar economic activities have helped Malaysia produce nearly 52,000 tonnes of aquaculture products with a total value of RM130 million in 1990. Ten years ago, the country produced only 8,000 tonnes and earned some RM20 million.

Faced with this prospect and problem, the once-again disturbed Kedah Menteri Besar Osman Aroff labelled these villagers and farmers as "anti-development" and those who "instigated the people to oppose development projects" as traitors. Strong words coming from a seasoned Osman Aroff who has had the experience of being vehemently opposed by farmers in the much criticized gargantuan Jerai International Park project some time ago, a commercial venture that was to have, in the final analysis, tickled the fancy of mainly the rich and famous who roam the world. [AM 1994:14(4)].

### MANIPULATED BY OUTSIDERS?

To be sure, the farmers were not amused by the insinuation (and the condescending attitude) of the Menteri Besar that they could not make good decisions about their future and that they were easily manipulated by outsiders. They were and remain averse to this project not only because of the strong bond they have with their land, but also because they were distressed by the failure of similar ventures elsewhere such as the one in Tanjung Dawai in Kedah where shrimp farmers were reported to have suffered a loss of RM3 million due to a viral infection affecting the shrimps.

But more than that, these farmers - like many other Malaysians - are also aware that this kind of aquaculture is unsustainable and environmentally destructive, apart from having the effect of marginalising many small-scale fishermen and farmers. Besides, what the farmers did is, in essence, the exercising of their democratic and legitimate right to defend their interests and livelihood. They were also living up to their social responsibility of safeguarding the overall welfare of society and the environment.

This is why, in refuting the claim of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed that 90 per cent of the landowners supported the Kerpan project, the chairperson of the Kerpan Landowners' Action Committee, Haji Zakaria Ahmad, maintained in his press statement that "Fifty per cent of the landowners opposed the first phase while ninety per cent opposed the second phase." Collectively, they were not happy with the prawn project.



Haji Zakaria Ahmad: Chairperson of the Kerpan Landowners' Action Committee.

Furthermore, prior to this project, these farmers, like their counterparts elsewhere, were in many ways economically independent. As Haji Zakaria argued, "Most of us possess between five and six relong of padi land and the padi yield is valued at about RM500 per month - and not RM200 - RM300 per month as claimed by the government. We also do not need to buy rice, fish, vegetables, coconuts and fruits for these are now easily grown and available on our land." In other words, they will now become reliant on a private company and the State for their livelihood - in order to serve the insatiable appetite of foreign consumers such as those in Japan, Korea, and the West for prawns.

The compensation offered by the government also troubled the farmers. The farmers' land is agricultural, and therefore commands very low market value, argued the Prime Minister. But the Kerpan farmers felt that had they been allowed to upgrade their land to industrial status, they would surely be entitled to a more attractive compensation.

## LAND ACQUISITION ACT

And all this happened despite the fact that these farmers were at that time awaiting a High Court ruling on their challenge as to the validity of the State's takeover of their land for the purpose of this economic enterprise.

The haste with which the Kedah State government attempted to implement this project owes its origins to the successful passing in Parliament of the controversial amendment to the Land Acquisition Act in 1991, a piece of legislation that many Malaysians view as undemocratic and unconstitutional. The amendment gives infinite powers to the State to compulsorily acquire private property for any use that it deems to be economically beneficial to the country's development. Unlike in the earlier Act, the land acquired need not be confined to the State's use, but may be used "by any person or corporation for any purpose which in the opinion of the State Authority is beneficial to the economic development of Malaysia, or any part thereof or the public generally, or any class of the public."

From the Kerpan episode, one could argue that economic ventures like the tiger prawn project are likely to benefit the rich more than the poor and the underprivileged. This then brings us to the old question of what kind of development are we pursuing and who will really be its beneficiaries? Are we to support and condone the kind of development that promises short-term gains to the rich and powerful?

Is development solely socio-economic in nature, or shouldn't it also encompass the political, cultural and spiritual components? Should development necessarily and unavoidably result in pollution and environmental devastation?

These and other equally pressing questions should be posed,

and adroitly responded to, by a country like Malaysia where ordinary Malaysians are often reminded, and rightly so, of the importance of the teachings of the world's major religious traditions and the need to live by those spiritual guidelines. Islamic approach to development, for instance, accords primary importance to the concept of human dignity. In concrete terms, the interests, views and status of the poor and disadvantaged, like those of some of the Kerpan farmers, must be taken into account and appreciated so that socio-economic justice can be achieved.

## ALIENATION OF HUMAN BEINGS

In other words, the welfare of the impoverished and the needy must not be pushed aside or sacrificed at the altar of profits and the interests of the affluent. And yet, a society which condones and encourages a concentration of wealth, thus widening the gap between the rich and the poor, will indeed have difficulty in raising the dignity of ordinary human beings. Unless this social malaise is checked, the goal of achieving a just society will be relegated to a statement of intent, and nothing more. In addition, crass commercialism and consumerism that are spawned by a capitalistic system and which have haunted not only the elite but also the less fortunate, can eventually lead to the alienation of human beings from their fellow beings and even from God Himself. If and when this happens, of what good then is this development?

In Islam, as in some other faiths, the human being is considered God's vicegerent or trustee, someone who is entrusted to take care of the universe and the world on His behalf. As we have noticed in the case of the Kerpan project and other massive "development" projects in Malaysia, as well as in many other so-called developed countries, the

human being, it appears, has worked diligently towards his or her very own destruction. We need only to look at the contemptuous way we treat our rivers, sea, forests, hills, trees, the air, animals - not to mention our fellow beings.

By exploiting our natural resources in this way, particularly the non-renewable resources, we - at least those of us with authority - have violated our sacred responsibility as trustees. One would shudder to witness, for instance, how we siphon off oil from the Earth as if it would last forever. This is all done in the name of "development" - for the sake of short-term gains. It also entertains the ever increasing demands of motor vehicles, that have been religiously produced by the motor industry, and the voracious appetites (a.k.a. greed) of people who earnestly consume goods that are oil-based. The end result: depleting oil reserves, overwhelming air and water pollution, and health hazards.

*One would shudder to witness, for instance, how we siphon off oil from the Earth as if it would last forever.*

People like the farmers in Kerpan have a lot to offer by way of educating and reminding us all about the importance of living in harmony with Mother Nature. Furthermore, their life-style would suggest that treating natural resources merely as commodities for sale, as the profiteers often do, brings out the ugly Utilitarian Devil in humans.

Unless the moral of such stories like Kerpan is heeded, the immense interests of the elite and the powerful will continue to triumph over the collective responsibility of human beings to protect and sustain their only planet, and also over their right to a healthy and more meaningful life. In this situation, no amount of money and material wealth can "fix" the problem afflicting humankind. ♦

# “WE HAVE BEEN BADLY OPPRESSED”

*says Kerpan farmer*

The little known village of Kerpan near Alor Star gripped the nation's attention recently as news filtered through of defiant farmers confronting bulldozers attempting to enter their paddy fields. A joint venture company, Samak Aquaculture Sdn Bhd, had earmarked 1,000 acres of the agriculture land here for a tiger prawn cultivation project despite stiff opposition from many local farmers. After a tense stand-off, police swooped down on 16 January against those holding out in the wee hours of the morning. The result: 23 men and 10 women detained for periods ranging from three days to a week.

Samak, which links the Kedah state government with interested farmers and Saudi businessmen, then moved in its heavy machinery, as riot police stood by keeping a watchful eye. Under the first phase of the project, the company would takeover about 500 acres of the farmers' fertile paddy land. What provoked the farmers' ire was the intrusion had preempted court proceedings: the chairman of the Kerpan Farmers Action Committee, Zakaria Ahmad, had summoned the Kedah state government to appear in an Alor Setar court on 21 March in a bid to challenge the legality of the land acquisition.

When *Aliran Monthly* visited the site soon after the arrests, we saw angry bulldozers snorting and



The Little known village of Kerpan

grunting as they went about leveling the paddy fields, disturbing the tranquility of the idyllic rural setting. Nearby, Chenon Bakar cut a sorry figure. Standing dejectedly in front of his wooden house, he surveyed the destructive machines at work before him. It was almost as if he was bidding farewell to the rice-fields that had been so much a part of his life.

He invited us warmly into his humble home. He was one of those unjustly arrested and released within a week, explained the weary farmer; the police, to their credit, had treated him well in custody. But when he returned home after his release, the truth dawned on

Chenon. Forces he could not understand, acting in the name of 'development,' were irresistably taking away the simple life-style he was accustomed to.

True, they had offered him 'compensation': a few thousand ringgit per acre and mandatory shares in the project. But, deep within, Chenon knew that would hardly be enough to compensate him for the loss of his self-sufficient, independent life off the land, the only life he had ever known. As he and another resident, Saad Nayan, talked to us, they brimmed with indignation when they described how outsiders had seized their inheritance land...

## Interview with Chenon bin Bakar and Saad bin Nayan

**CHENON:** We have been badly oppressed. Our case has gone to court but they don't want to take that into consideration. That's why, for this project, we tried to block the machinery from entering. That's the reason we were arrested...

**AM:** The work has just started here?

**CHENON:** They first came here in November 1993. When everyone harassed them and obstructed them, they stopped.

**AM:** Now they have entered again?

**CHENON:** They have entered again. See here, this is a Court Order - on 21 March when the matter will be heard - but they didn't want to wait.

**SAAD:** They don't want to consider it.

**AM:** So, it covers 1,000 acres?

**CHENON:** Yes.

**AM:** How many landowners are involved?

**CHENON:** Very many. Because this property is *harta pesaka* (inheritance property). It's not as if this property is from our generation. There are *geran* (titles) going back 60 years.

**SAAD:** More than 300 families.

**AM:** How many of them agreed to this project?

**CHENON:** The majority didn't agree but what could they do?

**AM:** But the PM said that many had agreed, only a few opposed the project.



**CHENON:** We have been badly oppressed

**CHENON:** They did not provide the forms for them to contest.

**SAAD:** They only gave them to 23 people.

**AM:** We don't understand.

**CHENON:** The form is used to file a challenge in the court. They didn't want to provide many forms. The land office did not want to issue many forms - they controlled the number.

**AM:** Without the forms, you cannot make a challenge?

**CHENON:** No, we can't.

**AM:** They only gave you 24 forms?

**CHENON:** 23.

**SAAD:** They didn't give the rest.

**CHENON:** Having obtained the forms, to enter court proceedings - they have to pay RM1,500.

**AM:** Per person?

**CHENON:** Each person; per lot...per *geran*. The court will hold the money and only then can proceedings commence. Like a deposit. But if we lose, the money is lost.

**AM:** These are the proceedings related to the plot of land?

**CHENON:** They (the farmers) are

not contesting the price; they've already won the case.

If you'd read the newspapers the other day you would know, it has been cancelled - illegal acquisition. Now they've amended the process. They want to take...

**AM:** Now they have the power. What they are doing now is legal.

**CHENON:** They are saying it's legal but we are saying it's not. This is what the proceedings on 21 March are about.

**AM:** So, what is it you want? Is it a problem of compensation or...

**CHENON:** It's not that we don't want to give; we want to give.

**AM:** So, it's just the compensation?

**CHENON:** The compensation.

**AM:** What compensation has the government offered?

**CHENON:** If it's in the middle, a long distance from the bunds, it's RM18,000 per acre. At the sides, closer to the bunds, RM 24,000 per acre.

**AM:** And what are you asking for?

**CHENON:** I want RM50,000.

**AM:** 50?

**CHENON:** Yes.

**AM:** Irrespective of whether it's further or nearer?

**CHENON:** Yes.

**AM:** Per acre?

**CHENON:** Per relong - 0.28 hectare.

**AM:** One acre is nearly half a hectare. A relong is bigger, isn't it?

**CHENON:** Smaller. It's quite close - one and a half relongs to an acre.

Now, they want us to buy shares in the project - RM15,000 will be deducted for the shares.

**SAAD:** If one acre is compensated at RM18,000, RM3,000 will be given to us.

**AM:** So, RM15,000 in shares? How many shares?

**CHENON:** 15,000.

**AM:** 15 lots?

**CHENON:** RM15,000 per acre. One acre of our land will be worth RM15,000 in shares - they will deduct this. Now, our *geran* and everything else will be finished.

**AM:** So, cash RM3,000 only.

**CHENON:** Yes, cash RM3,000 only.

**AM:** So, the RM15,000 will be entered into the company and you will own shares in the company?

**CHENON:** Yes. There are those who have agreed. It's not to say that everyone disagrees. But even among those who have agreed we don't really want shares in the ...

**AM:** If you were to put in RM15,000, what do you stand to gain?

**CHENON:** It will be based on the profits. It's not like ASB where it's guaranteed not to fall below RM1.00. But this is not guaranteed. If there's a loss, we incur the loss.

**AM:** You don't know when you can make...

**CHENON:** We don't know when. They have promised 25 per cent of the profits not the capital. That is if the company makes a profit. If there's no profit...? Understand?

**AM:** At the moment, you are making your living off the land, right? So, when they acquire your land...

**CHENON:** No more land, no more income.

**AM:** You can't find work?

**CHENON:** It's already been three seasons that those of us who had opposed are without money.

**AM:** Only those who oppose? What about those who have agreed? They get the RM3,000?

**CHENON:** They get RM3,000. They can get RM500 per season before the project commences.

**AM:** So what work are they doing now if their land has already been acquired?

**SAAD:** They work for the company.

**AM:** But can all of them get jobs with the company?



Dr. Mahathir: Yes, he can talk. Like he's talking to small children.

**SAAD:** People like us, what work can we do?

**AM:** This RM50,000 compensation figure, do all of you agree on this figure?

**CHENON:** Yes, agreed.

**AM:** So everyone has agreed?

**CHENON:** We don't want to participate in the project; we just want the money - the land you can take.

**AM:** Is that the market price - RM50,000?

**SAAD:** That's the project value. Market value, no. The project value would surely be high. If they're compensating to build a highway, the compensation for that is also high. We want the land value to be based on its project value.

**AM:** But Dr Mahathir was saying it's only RM2,000 to RM3,000.

**CHENON:** Yes, he can talk (*dia boleh cakap*). Like he's talking to small children (*budak-budak*). Just think about it, the RM50,000 will have to cover the house, we have to look for another plot somewhere else. Not easy.

**AM:** The houses here haven't been affected?

**CHENON:** Over there, they've had to shift.

**AM:** There's this RM500 payment - who pays this RM500?

**CHENON:** The government. They pay...

**AM:** Every season?

**CHENON:** Every season as long as the project is not operational. Each season RM500.

**AM:** For how long?

**CHENON:** Until the project is

operational. When it's operational and the prawns are produced, then it's over. And then it's calculated based on the profit; if they make a loss: nothing.

**AM:** How many seasons do you have in a year? They're paying RM500...

**CHENON:** Twice.

**AM:** Twice a year. RM1,000.

**CHENON:** Yes.

**AM:** Now you're asking for RM50,000. Those who agreed earlier at a cheaper price what are their thoughts now?

**CHENON:** I don't know about them. They've already agreed and signed.

**AM:** Oh! They've already signed?

**CHENON:** They have taken away the *geran*, and everything has already been stamped.

**AM:** Your *geran* hasn't been handed over?

**CHENON:** No, I don't want to. I haven't handed mine over.

**AM:** So, how can they start (the project)?

**CHENON:** That's the thing. We obstruct the project and they arrest us.

**SAAD:** Because many people don't agree.

**AM:** Earlier when they amended the Land Acquisition Act, we protested because we knew the people who would lose out would be people like us, ordinary people. They seize the land for well-known people, for people who have power. This is what's happening now. Here, Malacca, Johor, Penang, all over. But why did they pick this particular area? It's quite an isolated spot.

**SAAD:** This area has many Malays. Not many Chinese. The Malays give in more easily. The Chinese would be more difficult because they would expect a higher compensation. That's why they have come to a Malay area. The Chinese would never give.

**CHENON:** They also know that the soil here is suitable for prawn cultivation.

**AM:** Who is running this project? They say the people are from Saudi Arabia. Why don't they carry out this project in Saudi Arabia?

**CHENON:** I don't know. ♦



"Many people don't agree":  
From left: Chenon, another resident and Saad

## The Kerpan Controversy: **Prawn profits and human dignity**



Determined "developers", with an eye on prawn profits, have literally bulldozed their way into the idyllic paddy-fields of Kerpan in the rice-bowl state of Malaysia - leaving behind a trail of angry farmers fuming over the loss of their inheritance land and their livelihood.

**MUSTAFA K ANUAR** looks at the larger issues of development and human dignity embodied in the Kerpan controversy. Full report on page 34.