

Distance does not make us fonder

Malaysians in the peninsula tend to think that the country is just that strip of land between Thailand and Singapore, something that leaves those on the other side of the pond feeling like stepchildren.

By RASHVINJEET S. BEDI

rashvin@thestar.com.my

If a Malaysian from the peninsula were to be asked where Malaysia is, he would most likely say that it is located between Singapore and Thailand.

Hardly anyone would mention Sabah and Sarawak, which is only about a two-hour flight from Kuala Lumpur.

In geographical terms, approximately 1,200km of South China Sea waters separate peninsular Malaysia from Sarawak, but this geographical divide is not unique to our country alone.

Indonesia and the Philippines are among the countries that have had to deal with land masses being divided by large bodies of water, and these distances can greatly impact a nation.

Pakistan, for one, underwent a territorial break-up after the Indo-Pakistani War in 1971, which ended with East Pakistan gaining independence to form the state of Bangladesh.

On a local level, many Malaysians find this physical distance a barrier in many areas, especially when it comes to integration efforts.

"The large span of water divides us. Coupled with the immigration laws, it affects the emergence of a true Malaysian identity," said Prof Emeritus Dr Ranjit Singh of Universiti Utara Malaysia's (UUM) College of Law, Government and International Studies.

Because of the 18-point and 20-point

agreement that was inked prior to the formation of Malaysia, Sabahans and Sarawakians are free to migrate to the peninsula but not the other way round.

Although Malaysia is a 50-year-old nation, Dr Ranjit believes there is still not much integration between the people of peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak.

"Do Sabahans think of themselves as Sabahans or Malaysians? At the societal level, there should be more integration," said Dr Ranjit.

Even now, there are Malaysians who do not know the difference between Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day. On a national level, the latter was not declared a public holiday until 2010.

Historically speaking, Merdeka which is celebrated in the peninsula does not have much to do with Sabah and Sarawak.

Earlier this year, July 22 marked the 50th anniversary of Sarawak's independence from the British in 1963, an event known as Liberation Day.

Sabah, known as North Borneo then, had also gained independence from the British on Aug 31 the same year, just 16 days before its historic day to form Malaysia with Sarawak, Singapore and Malaya.

And although Malaysia is 50 this year, there are many who believe it to be six years older.

Malaysian Institute of Development and Asian Studies (Midas) director Dr K. J. John believes "conceptual distance" between peninsular Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak remains a bigger issue than physical distance.

"I was born before Merdeka, and I only understood everything in terms of Merdeka until about 10 years ago. Nobody educated me about the concept of Malaysia Day," said Dr John, who now organises a get together every Sept 16.

Then, there is also the insufficient recognition of the various people in Sabah and Sarawak.

Sociologist Dr Sarjit Singh of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) said that most peninsular Malaysians talked about the Malay, Chinese and Indian races as making up the majority of Malaysians, which leaves out the many and varied indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak.

"Those ideas need to be repositioned. Our multiracial representation should not only be peninsula-based, but should also comprise the people of Sabah and Sarawak. They also contributed to Malaysia's development," he said.

There are 26 indigenous groups of people in Sarawak and 38 in Sabah. The Iban and Kadazandusun make up the majority in Sarawak and Sabah respectively.

And with most of Malaysia's military forces based in peninsular Malaysia, there is the issue of security. During the armed intrusion of Lahad Datu earlier this year, troops were brought in from the peninsula to help out with the situation.

Another issue that rankles many Sabahans and Sarawakians is the fact that they are far behind in infrastructure development compared to the peninsula. Basic amenities such

as roads, water and electricity are lacking, especially in the interior.

"In some places in Sabah, they have ceiling fans but no electricity. They need proper development," said Dr Sarjit.

This is despite the fact that both states make large contributions to the oil coffers of the country. Many Sabahans and Sarawakians feel they are at the raw end of the deal as they can only watch oil-rich Brunei with envy.

"Underneath it all, there is always a feeling of being treated like a stepchild," said Dr Ranjit.

One reason for east Malaysians not feeling as "Malaysian" as their peninsula counterparts, said Faridah Stephens, is because they have to board a plane to get to the peninsula.

"Malaysia is very Semenanjung-centric because the main seat of power is in west Malaysia. All the major decisions are made here," said the daughter of Sabah's first Chief Minister, Tun Fuad Stephens.

And while west and east Malaysia could benefit from being connected by a bridge or land, political analyst Khoo Kay Peng thinks that the distance between the two will cease to be a problem if more decentralisation took place.

"Air transportation is cheaper and trade activities can happen in the far corner of the world. There is no reason why any part of Malaysia should be less developed," he added.

As air fares become much cheaper, the gap called South China Sea becomes narrower.