

Getting to the heart of diplomacy

AT YOUR SERVICE

By **TAN SRI RASTAM MOHD ISA**

Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

THE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also known as Wisma Putra, has been at the forefront of promoting and defending Malaysia's interests abroad.

Over the years, the functions and responsibilities of the ministry have evolved considerably in keeping with the demands of the nation and the constantly changing global environment. The broadening of Malaysia's interests, covering many areas, has necessitated a non-traditional foreign policy implementation through innovative means.

Today, Wisma Putra operates from Putrajaya and through 105 Malaysian diplomatic and consular missions abroad. We also rely on the services of honorary consuls around the world.

The ministry's Strategic Plan outlines the way forward for Wisma Putra for 2009-2015. Among others, it focuses on the advancement of Malaysia's political, economic and strategic interests by engaging with several key countries.

The success of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's visit to China earlier this year followed a series of successful visits to several Asean, Asian and European countries.

Several foreign leaders including from Indonesia, Brunei, China, Australia, Thailand and New Zealand have also visited Malaysia since he took office in April 2009.

These exchange of visits constitute an important component of Malaysia's relations and cooperation with foreign countries. Wisma Putra facilitates and coordinates the follow-up and implementation of their outcome with other relevant ministries and agencies.

Mechanisms such as the Annual Consultations between the Prime Minister and leaders of our close neighbours, joint commissions headed by the Foreign Minister, and other forms of bilateral consultations provide the vehicle for dialogue and consultation with other countries.

Fourteen key performance indicators (KPIs) have been identified to measure the performance of the ministry. These include the enhancement of bilateral relations and cooperation with our immediate neighbours and strategic partners; strengthening regional cooperation through Asean; advancing Malaysia's interests at the United Nations and other regional organisations; and providing efficient and effective consular services.

As the country develops and prospers, and with more Malaysians travelling abroad for tourism, employment, business, educational and other purposes, the demand for more efficient and effective consular services has risen considerably. Wisma Putra and our missions assist in furnishing Certificates of Good Conduct, attesting important documents and providing answers to various consular related enquiries.

Travellers who lose their passports, money and belongings can seek assistance from Malaysian missions.

Assistance is also provided for the increasing number of Malaysians imprisoned in foreign countries or killed and injured in accidents abroad. Wisma Putra has reduced the time taken to issue a Certificate of Good Conduct from four to six weeks down to less than two days since March 2008.

Our officers and staff have responded fast and efficiently to the calls to help a Malaysian stranded in a remote village in Nepal, to assist our businessmen who run into difficulties in Africa, or to organise the evacuation of our citizens from disaster or conflict areas.

In all these situations, the selfless dedication and commitment remains behind the scenes and is seldom raised or publicised, whether during the airport siege in Bangkok, terrorist attack in Mumbai or earthquake in Padang.

The work of our missions is complemented by dedicated honorary consuls who are prominent personalities established and known to the authorities and societies in their cities or regions.

They provide valuable consular assistance, actively promoting Malaysia through cultural, tourism, sports, investment and through their business activities. They maintain good contact with Malaysians and locals in their areas, be it in Basle, Madrid, Hamburg, Bali, Adelaide or Beirut.

Wisma Putra also provides support and services for the diplomatic community in Malaysia. Our Protocol Department attends to questions relating to privileges and immunities of foreign diplomats as well as their needs, safety and security, in liaison and coordination with other relevant ministries and agencies.

Recently, a new smart identity card for foreign diplomats was introduced in cooperation with the Immigration Department. In order to develop greater efficiency and responsiveness to the public and the diplomatic corps, the Ministry has obtained MS ISO 9001:2008 certificates for both the Protocol Department and Consular Division since June 2009.

Efforts are constantly undertaken to ensure that Wisma Putra officers are adequately trained in protocol and ceremony as well as other areas within the Ministry's competency.

Such training is regularly conducted at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) which is part of Wisma Putra. Malaysia remains an important and active founding member of Asean. We will make concerted efforts to work with other Asean member countries and Asean's partners to realise the Asean Community by 2015.

The Malaysian Asean National Secretariat resides in Wisma Putra. It coordinates the various Asean activities with other ministries and agencies as well as with the Asean Secretariat in Jakarta and the national secretariats of other member countries.

Malaysia continues to play a key role in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) which we consider important for promoting cooperation among the Islamic countries.

In November, Malaysia hosted and chaired the D-8 Ministerial Meeting where Foreign Ministers mapped out further initiatives to promote greater economic cooperation between the member states first outlined and agreed at the D-8