

HIGH-RANKING VISITS**Junior officers learn that diplomacy is all about making a connection**

MY junior diplomats were in Kuching, Sarawak, two weeks ago for diplomatic training at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR).

From the moment they landed in Kuching, they (and I) were impressed by what they experienced, and the opportunities that were accorded.

One of the highlights of this segment of the training module was the opportunity to meet Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Fadillah Yusof, who spoke with the junior diplomats on a Sunday afternoon.

Despite his busy schedule, he spent two hours motivating and imparting knowledge to these young officers.

The meeting was a bonus. The institute, being all protocol-conscious and etiquette-savvy, thought it was common courtesy that we inform the office of the member of parliament of Petra Jaya that there would be a cohort of young diplomats visiting. This was the norm.

Then we received word that the MP would be pleased to receive the group in Kuching.

Sunday or not, this was not an opportunity to be missed, so along they went, in full suit and tie, directly from their flight to the courtesy call.



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These were officers on the cusp of their first overseas posting, so a meeting with the DPM was a big thing.

Their experience did not end there, for the next day, during the briefing by the Sarawak government, their questions were answered by State Secretary Datuk Amar Mohamad Abu Bakar Marzuki.

From him, they learned how there were senior officers who understood their subjects well enough to answer any and all questions related to their field.

They came away from that briefing with a new understanding, not only of Sarawak and its direction, but also of the calibre of officers needed in any civil service.

That briefing inspired them better than any training we could have given.

Two humbling experiences would already be two too many. And yet, as fate would have it,



Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Fadillah Yusof (left), the member of parliament for Petra Jaya, meeting junior diplomats in Kuching recently. PIC COURTESY OF DR SHAZELINA ZAINUL ABIDIN

they were not yet done. What was to have been a dinner talk on Malaysia's Eastern Field Command morphed into something more.

Instead of focusing on the role of defence in Sabah and Sarawak, Chief of Staff Major-General Datuk Reizal Arif gave the young officers even more to chew on.

This was a military man who had served in United Nations peacekeeping operations, in similar North Atlantic Treaty Organisation activities, and been educated in China, Indonesia and

the United States.

Expecting a large entourage to accompany Reizal, the young officers had their perceptions challenged when he turned up with just one officer and proceeded to work the PowerPoint and video presentations himself.

Every single meeting the group had in Kuching was an eye-opener.

Not so much because of the wealth of information these officers received, but because of the hands-on and personal approach of the personalities who hosted

them, from the DPM to the state secretary to the chief of staff at the Eastern Field Command.

We returned to KL to find that in our absence, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, too, had had his unannounced *turun padang* at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, where he met officers carrying out their duties.

Sometimes as we go up the chain of command, we forget how to connect on a personal level.

It probably becomes easier to let others do the work while we argue that we do the thinking part.

This is why when people in authority commit themselves to connecting with others outside of their organisation, it becomes a humbling experience.

The hierarchical nature of Malaysian society meant that the *turun padang* concept had to be introduced as a novel idea when others have been doing it on a regular basis.

Diplomacy, by definition, has to be done on a personal level, meaning the connection is all-important.

This is what I hope the junior officers took away from their Kuching experience.

The writer is a foreign service officer who has served in bilateral and multilateral posts