

Preparing envoys for all tasks, regal or mundane



AHMAD FUZI ... Most of our students have the potential to be good diplomats.

Diplomats need more than just a good suit when they represent the country. The Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations helps to forge officers with everything from international policy to dinner etiquette at their fingertips, writes SHAREEM AMRY.

WHEN Malaysia's ambassador to Peru became one of the victims of a hostage drama at the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima, Peru in 1996, the country anxiously followed the siege until his release 12 days later.

The diplomatic corps' image also changed overnight. Although career officers acknowledge that being taken hostage isn't usually part of the job description, neither is it just about dressing well and pushing papers around.

"When someone comes in for help, diplomats cannot say, 'Oh, I'm sorry. We don't know what to do about your problem'," said Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak, director-general of the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

"They should know what to do whatever the situation is, from demonstrations outside the embassy, to the death of a Malaysian citizen, even marrying couples."

As a former ambassador

himself, Ahmad Fuzi knows from experience that overseas duty can sometimes be awkward.

During his stint in Australia some years ago, he faced demonstrators picketing the High Commission in protest against the death penalty Malaysia imposed on two Australians who had been caught smuggling drugs. "You have to be cool and calm in such a situation. Ideally, a diplomat should always be cool and calm," he said.

The institute, tucked away in a quiet corner of Kuala Lumpur, was established in 1991, partly to help officers learn to deal with this bewildering array of potential scenarios.

There was an increasing need for this kind of training, particularly from the Foreign Ministry, but also from other agencies that dealt with matters of foreign trade, diplomatic and security policies.

Only five courses were offered the first year, but by 1997, they had been expanded to 69, each with a duration ranging from half a day to three months.

The breadth of the courses is impressive; one can teach the art of dining and grooming, while another will train officers on the finer points of dealing with a hostage situation (a course that was, incidentally, introduced after ambassador Datuk Ahmad Mokhtar Selat's unplanned stay at the Japanese residence in Peru).

Lessons in English for diplomacy, such as effective writing, reading and speaking skills are available, as well as courses on French, Spanish, German and Russian.

Courses on financial management and administration of missions abroad, media skills, international negotiations, maritime affairs, strategic analysis and international crisis management are among those in the works.

"Specially designed courses on information technology and diplomacy and Islam will also be offered, while a research and publication division will be established this year to further widen our scope of activities," said Ahmad Fuzi.

Constant expansion and updates of the syllabus are necessary to reflect the

changing scenarios and challenges that Malaysian diplomats face in an increasingly global arena.

"We want to develop a core of diplomats who are able to articulate and defend Malaysia's national and international interests on a global level," said Ahmad Fuzi.

"A good diplomat should also be one who could 'eat with a pauper and dine with a King'. Most of our students have the potential to be very good diplomats — all they lack is experience."

Since the institute's establishment, some 8,000 participants have taken part in its programmes and courses, including 513 from 69 Asean and other developing countries.

Along with the rest of the Government, however, the institute, which is under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister's Department, faces budget cuts this year.

Although some programmes may eventually have to be sacrificed, Ahmad Fuzi said he hoped to find third party funding to minimise the cuts.

For all its work, the institute has a relatively low profile and may be known to the public more for its practice of organising talks by visiting foreign dignitaries.

Foreign political heavyweights such as Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her South African counterpart, Nelson Mandela, have graced these talks, as have the United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan.

As for the future, the institute is scheduled for a major infrastructural boost once it moves to Putrajaya, the new Federal Government seat in Sepang, by the year 2000.

"This building we are in now actually belongs to Intan (the National Institute of Public Administration) and was originally meant to be a recreational building."

"Once we move to Putrajaya, we will be closer to Wisma Putra as well as other agencies that we have dealings with. The facilities will also be better with a hostel for 100 students, room for a larger library and recreation facilities," said Ahmad Fuzi.