

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GDN-30

The Month of Malaysia's Birth

12 Road 5/35

Petaling Jaya

Malaysia

1 October 1963

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

This has been quite a month!

The birth of the Federation of Malaysia, two weeks after its originally scheduled date, has brought a break in diplomatic ties with the Philippines and in diplomatic and trade ties with Indonesia, anti-Malaysia riots in Jakarta and anti-Indonesian riots in Kuala Lumpur, some good old-fashioned bomb throwing in Kuching, Singapore elections with surprisingly moderate results, a swoop on alleged Communist students at Nanyang University, and a great and colorful celebration in Kuala Lumpur.

It all began long ago, in May 1960, when Malaya's Prime Minister, Tunjku Abdul Rahman, proposed a Malaysia Federation for Malaya, Singapore and the three Borneo territories of North Borneo, Brunei, and Sarawak. Things progressed only with difficulty. First the peoples of the Borneo territories rejected the idea and had to be won over. This was not too difficult for Sarawak and North Borneo, because of the threatening proximity of Indonesia, but the oil rich Sultan of Brunei apparently could not bear the thought of sharing his great wealth with his poorer and less religious neighbors and he decided to stay out. The Philippines revived an old claim to half of North Borneo and then began to lean ever so slightly in the direction of Indonesia when that great troubled nation decided to oppose Malaysia and embarked on a program of "confrontation". Early this year things looked brighter when the Tunjku met President Sukarno of Indonesia in Tokyo and received assurances of warm friendship. Later, there were meetings in Manila in which the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaya entered upon a course to create Maphilindo, some sort of loose confederation or get-together. Still, behind the smiles, Indonesia continued to attack the Tunjku and Malaya in press and public statements and "confrontation" was not interrupted.

Sukarno demanded and received assurance that the people of the Borneo territories would be consulted by an outside agency. This would allow Indonesia (and their Philippine followers) to accept Malaysia. Here in Kuala Lumpur, we thought Sukarno was only stalling for time. He wanted the birth of Malaysia to be postponed.

Nevertheless, U Thant was asked to conduct enquiries. This he did, sending a team of six U.N. observers to ascertain the views of the people of Sarawak and North Borneo on Malaysia. Immediately Indonesia raised difficulties. It had been agreed in Manila that all three countries could send observers to watch the U.N. team. Indonesia wanted to send 30 observers to each territory: 10 observers for each U.N. interviewer. Britain balked; four would be enough. Finally an agreement was reached and the Indonesians (and Philippines, who had been delayed for other reasons) flew in to watch, complete with their own radio transmitters, which were held by customs in Sarawak.

In the last weeks of August we knew that the team's findings would not be complete in time for the scheduled date of birth on August 31. The date was postponed and there was a rush to slow down preparations for festivities

and to cancel hotel reservations for the invited foreign dignitaries. We were in quite an uproar. Soon after, the new date of birth was scheduled for September 16.

On September 14 U Thant's findings were made public. The peoples of Sabah (North Borneo) and Sarawak were found to be largely in favor of joining Malaysia. Cries of "We told you so!" rang from Kuala Lumpur and preparations for the festivities were speeded up. Jakarta rejected the findings.

Meanwhile, Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Kuan-Yew, was brewing his own brand of trouble for Malaya's weary leaders. In a whirlwind of tours to explain things to his people, he announced that Singapore would appropriate to itself full independence (meaning control over foreign affairs and defense, which alone remained in British hands) on August 31. He went on to make remarks about the necessity of taking independence when you wanted it, not waiting to have it handed on a silver platter as Kuala Lumpur had done in 1957. Then he announced the dissolution of parliament and the calling of new elections in the shortest possible time (before anyone else would have a chance to do any campaigning).

Kuala Lumpur was properly shocked. "With friends like that, who needs enemies?" they asked. Still ringing in the ears of the government here was the thorough drubbing it had taken from Lee Kuan-Yew a short while ago when the Malaysia agreement was formally signed in London. The Kuala Lumpur leaders had been caught without having done their homework and the city-slickers from the south took them for a ride, getting all the concessions they wanted and more as their price of coming into Malaysia at all. Many people here were beginning to look as if they wished they had never mentioned Malaysia. Some even maintain that the Tungku's golf game suffered.

Charges, counter charges, threats, insults, and the kitchen sink were hurled back and forth across the thin strait separating Singapore from Malaya. Then Lee modified his stand and began to say nice things about the Tungku; we knew he was just staging a good show for the elections, and the conflict settled a bit. Or at least it shifted to another plane - to the nice, quiet, rational, regulated plane of an electoral fight. Amid all the ensuing loin girding and image promoting, Malaysia was born.

Kuala Lumpur had been turned into a city of lights. Lighted archways proclaiming the joy of Malaysia were thrown across major streets. Public buildings sprouted bunting and night-time pastel floodlights. In the Lake Gardens trees were festooned with colored lights, stages were erected for cultural shows, and all manner of refreshment stands were set up. Then we took a deep breath and hurled ourselves into three days of JOY: a reading of the Malaysia proclamation, state banquets, a great cultural show in the stadium (two hours of dragon dances, Indian dances and ronggeng can be quite trying), a parade of illuminated floats, massed bands displays, children's shows; on and on it went.

The Lake Garden was by far the most exciting and pleasant. Every night crowds gathered to walk through and watch one of the six different shows going simultaneously. (On two nights we had the rain we knew the Indonesians were praying for.) There were the Thai-influenced dances from Kelantan, Indonesian influenced shadow plays from the east coast, trance-like fire dancing from our own aborigines, dances from Sabah and Sarawak, and the usual bad variety show with its never ending parade of mediocre popular

singers, mediocre popular bands, and mediocre popular songs. But the crowds were exquisite. Soft gentle people milling about with small children; the magnificent array of colors in Indian, Chinese and Malay native dresses that provide one of the enduring visual delights of Kuala Lumpur; colored lights reflecting in the lake; and an intermittently spectacular fireworks display by a Japanese firm (whose managers regarded this as one of the proudest moments of their lives). There was a great concentration of the wild assortment of culinary delights, unhygienically prepared, that provide spice and variety for the palate and (eventual) immunity for the digestive tract. All this came together in a single arena of brightly lighted eating stalls, ringed by small people sitting in a tiny ball of kerosene light in the great dark grass selling handfuls of rambutans from their own trees. It was a great carnival of colors and soft lights, with enough room in all directions to transform the cacophony of sounds into a murmur of pleasure.

In the midst of all this pleasure, the telephones of the corps diplomatique began to ring incessantly. Jakarta refused to recognize the new Federation and diplomatic ties were cut. Manila asked to have its Embassy reduced to a Consulate, refusing for the present to recognize Malaysia; ties were broken there as well. In Jakarta the Malayan Embassy had planned a celebration. Unable to obtain a hall in any of the hotels, the Ambassador planned a party at the residence. Unable to obtain catering services, the Embassy wives planned to lay on their own spread. Anticipating difficulties with the city's electrical services, the Embassy staff laid in a supply of garden lanterns and candles. Then threats of demonstrations were heard and the party was cancelled, rather than to risk the lives, limbs and cars of the guests. With the break in diplomatic relations, Jakarta mobs stormed the Malayan and British Embassies. The Malayan Consul in Medan had to take refuge in the U.S. Consulate. In Jakarta, after the initial attack on the Malaysians, crowd fury turned against the British. The mobs got out of hand, but appeared sufficiently well organized and led to pick out unerringly the residences and cars of the British Embassy staff. A Scot major played his bagpipes in front of the crowd and the Ambassador had to stand guard over his gutted Embassy to keep Indonesians from breaking into the strongrooms and safes. Indonesia's foreign minister, Dr. Subandrio, apologized to the British, saying that Indonesia wanted nothing more than friendly relations.

In Kuala Lumpur, we retaliated with our own demonstrations, but these were of a totally different and almost comical nature. At one p.m. (lunchtime) on the 17th, demonstrators arrived by motor scooters at the Indonesian Embassy. The riot police were already there, together with the foreign and domestic news staffs, who had been informed an hour earlier by the Department of Information (Jakarta can hardly match that for efficiency). A huge picture of President Sukarno was burned at the gates, by demonstrators who appeared more frolicking than frenzied. There were no Chinese present; only Malays and a handful of Indians. Gates were torn off. Rocks crashed through windows. The Indonesian seal, a screaming Garuda bird, was ripped from the building and dragged through the streets behind a scooter by a boisterous, well-mounted mob whose anarchic manner was not sufficient to prevent it from giving hand signals when turning the corner. The demonstrators roared up to the residence of the Prime Minister. The Tunjku was moved to tears by their manifestation of loyalty. He told them not to take the law into their own hands, to return to the festivities and to leave matters to their leaders. Then, since it is an old Malay custom to offer guests refreshments, he sent out tea and cakes and the rioters calmed their patriotic ardor and reenforced

their carnival spirit sipping tea on the residence lawn.

Sarawak's celebrations were marred by the explosion of a hand grenade thrown from a coffee shop into a taxi lot. No one was killed, but the scheduled parade of floats was cancelled. Sabah experienced only joy.

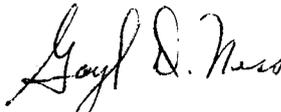
In Singapore, the lights from the festivities had hardly begun to fade when elections were held, on September 22. Lee Kuan-Yew's Peoples Action Party (PAP) surprised most observers by winning a clear victory over the Alliance, two parties of the extreme left (the United Peoples Party and the Barisan Sosialis) and a string of independents. PAP took 37 of the 51 seats; Barisan 13, and the UPP one. Thirty of the PAP seats were won with a larger total vote than the combined votes of the two far left parties. It was a clear and complete victory. Singapore traders have registered their approval of the outcome, which, it appears, will provide both political stability and a strong and intelligent opposition in the central government.

Now Lee has increased his attacks on the Communists, identifying the forthcoming struggle as one between the Communists and the rest. A few nights ago the stillness of Nanayang University was broken up by a police roundup of alleged Communists. We can't yet say where this will lead, for Lee has become an exceedingly tough and clever politician.

Then the Indonesians jumped in again, this time by cutting off trade relations with Malaysia. (They have always maintained support for "volunteers" raiding the boarders of Sarawak from Indonesian Borneo.) Three-fourths of Indonesia's rubber, which contains 30% dirt, is normally remilled, processed and sold in Singapore. Most of Indonesia's tin is smelted here. Sumatran vegetables are sold in Penang. Indonesia buys about US\$230 million of goods annually from Malaysia, and her entrepot trade with Singapore amounts to over US\$200 million. The forced break in this trade will cause some hardship in a small group of Malayan enterprises, but it is likely to hurt Indonesia most. Besides hurting the state's pocket book, this will have an adverse effect on the small producers, especially in Sumatra and the Celebes. And these were the islands that led the rebellion against Jakarta in 1957-8. No one seems to think the Jakarta government is either efficient enough or honest enough to make these decrees effective, but there is bound to be a real impairment of efficiency in an economy that is already almost moribund. The ultimate outcome is anyone's guess.

At the moment the air is still. We're not sure whether this is simply a breathing space before the next round of troubles, or whether things might actually settle a bit generally. We are certain, however, that this has been quite a month.

Sincerely,



Gayl D. Ness

Received New York October 11, 1963