

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GDN-31

The Peace Corps in Malaysia
Problems and Impact of the Volunteer

12 Road 5/35
Petaling Jaya, Selangor
Malaysia
7 November 1963

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Although I've made no systematic attempt to observe the Peace Corps in Malaysia, I have heard a few casual remarks about the volunteers from my Malayan friends around the country; these have been favorable, but seldom eulogistic. I have also known some of the administrators and have met a few of the volunteers themselves. On the basis of this very meager information, I had formed the vague impression that the Peace Corps was doing a good job unobtrusively, but also that it was having only a very limited impact on the country. This seemed to be largely because Malaysians, like many people in the underdeveloped areas, have come to accept foreign technicians and aid as a natural and just part of life.

Vague impressions of this nature are often shaken when confronted with more complete information. Mine was shaken when I was asked to speak on rural development at a conference of all Peace Corps nurses and rural development workers held at the Cameron Highlands, one of the cool vegetable and strawberry-growing hill stations not far from Kuala Lumpur. For two days Jeannine and I hovered, shivering, close to listless, smoky fires, mingling with these happy active young compatriots. We heard of their backgrounds, their experiences, their ideas and their problems. I still think the Peace Corps is doing a good job, unobtrusively, but now I have a different idea of the impact the volunteers are having on Malaysia - and the change comes largely from hearing of their problems.

Some of the volunteers face the problem of being not really needed in this rather affluent underdeveloped country. With a pragmatism characteristic of their breed, the engineers and architects argued that their part of the program might well be discontinued. Malaysia already has enough well trained engineers and the volunteers feel that are gaining far more than they can give here. Although there are many good architects, there seems to be need for more training in good design, especially for the young Malaysian-trained architects; the necessity is more for teachers than for practitioners. In addition the volunteers feel they may simply be allowing Government to continue offering insufficient incentives to draw the good architects into service. All of these volunteers were quite happy with their work, but they suffered from almost puritanical pangs of conscience. The lowest priority Peace Corps goal is to provide a rich experience for the volunteer; the host country and its people come first. There was some feeling here that the priorities may have been reversed.

Another problem is posed by other foreign technicians and "experts" in Malaysia. There are the normal complaints, shared by many Malaysians, of the "expert" who speeds through in a big car and makes recommendations on the basis of too limited knowledge and experience in the country. Like many Malaysians,

the volunteers often feel they know more about the country's needs and potentials than does the quick-trip expert.

Part of the "expert" problem lies in the disparity of incomes between the volunteer and other foreign - even local - personnel. The volunteer here receives M\$270 per month (US\$90), plus quarters; if his job requires transportation, he is sometimes given a motor bike. The allowance is approximately what the Malaysian nurses are paid, about half the pay of school teachers with comparable qualifications, a third to a fourth of professional salaries, and about one tenth the salaries of many foreign experts. Thus while other foreigners carry all the marks of being highly valued by the Government - or someone - the volunteer carries none of these, and may even appear to be of less monetary value than his Malaysian counterparts. "When my friends ask me about this - 'Don't you have a car?' - I try to explain that I'm a volunteer; the foreign expert and the local guy are hired to do a job. I don't think this helps much, though."

Adding to this problem of status and value is a peculiar problem of acculturation. As one volunteer remarked, "Getting adjusted to Malay or Chinese customs was easy enough, but I'll never be able to eat peas with my fork in my left hand!" The volunteers have all been well briefed on "Malayan culture" in their U.S. training, but they have come largely unprepared for the bureaucratic culture in which they must work. Since this culture is derived from British sources and is therefore shared by most of the well-paid foreign technicians here, it is natural that the volunteers are vulnerable to a kind of creeping anti-British sentiment. This is reenforced by what is perhaps the biggest problem of the volunteers - their frustrations with what they call "the system".

A young woman volunteering as a veterinary doctor is disturbed by the almost total lack of communication between the veterinary and agricultural departments. An agricultural extension worker finds it difficult to understand why the people at the agricultural schools and the University's agricultural faculty hardly speak to one another, necessitating duplication of programs and research. A first-rate all-round agriculturalist, a blond, robust typically American-looking young man, working on one of the land schemes, recently got a tractor out of moth balls, fitted it with cleated wheels for heavy mud and was about to start ploughing the acreage allotted to rice on the scheme. (After almost two years of development this rice land was still largely untouched.) Just as the ploughing was about to get underway, the state agriculturalist transferred the tractor to another district. Another soft-spoken smiling extension officer wanted to work with a group of Malays who had already formed their own farmers' association. Plans were laid to try new crops and to bring unused land into cultivation; an operations room was planned to dramatize progress, and a start was made in the cooperative purchase of fertilizers and other goods. The volunteer's efforts were discouraged and finally sabotaged by his Malay counterpart, an Australian-trained white collar type who never gets out of his office to talk with farmers. The closest he comes is to his field assistants, and the major force that gets him out of the office at all is the mileage allowance that enables him to pay off his interest-free Government car loan without touching his own salary. (This is not at all unusual. I have seen the same force operating in many parts of the country. It gets people out of the office, but not necessarily to do their real jobs.) This did not help the Government's efforts to uplift the Malays, because the volunteer simply went to **work** with some farmers who

were outside of the pale of the bureaucracy. Now he has been so successful with some Chinese tobacco growers that they want to pay his rent, to feed him, and to show their appreciation in many other ways.

The engineers and heavy equipment supervisors (who came as operators but were quickly upgraded because of their skills) chaff under a complexity of rules, especially those that preclude using monetary incentives to encourage good work. They complain that you can't fire bad workers and you can't raise the pay of good workers. The proliferation of rules 'up and down the line' seems to take all the initiative out of workers. No one will try to change an established procedure, partly because he would not feel comfortable approaching his superiors and partly because authorization for change would have to be sought through many obstacles upward and would have to come through many obstacles downward. A battle is being fought out in the Rural and Industrial Development Authority's commercial college between Americans (including volunteers) who want the training to be oriented pragmatically toward local business, and bureaucrats (including an Englishman) who want it oriented toward London commercial examinations, even though these examinations are not accepted by the Malaysian Government for secretarial or other relevant positions.

These are only illustrative of the common frustrations with the system the volunteers experience in Malaysia. They are in part the common frustrations of the young and active, and these volunteers would experience many of the same frustrations working at home. I think they are more than this, though; they are the frustrations of young people trained in a society that is less concerned with status and more concerned with accomplishment than the society in which they are working. This, then, is a broad pattern of the strains of culture contact, made up of variegated individual challenges, challenges that are undoubtedly the most important part of the volunteer's life abroad. In facing and meeting these challenges the volunteer not only increases his own stature, he provides a new set of standards by which his hosts can judge behavior. I think it is here that the major impact of the volunteer lies.

Where communications are blocked by status-conscious bureaucrats, the volunteer often sets about building his own informal lines of communications through the cultivation of personal friendships. Here he is helped as much by his novelty as an American as by his own lack of status consciousness. It seems far easier for an American volunteer than for a Malaysian bureaucrat to walk into another office unannounced and to introduce himself. The volunteer on the land scheme simply turned his attention to another production increasing project when the tractor was removed. This wasn't without frustration and loss of efficiency, but at the same time, he refused to give up at this setback. A road engineer found that he could work with the margins of the system, using overtime to reward industrious gangs and to stimulate the less productive. Pressure is applied to the system by volunteers who are not afraid to get their hands dirty, to try new things themselves, to work along with the men, and especially by those - like the equipment operators - who show marvelous skill and pride in their work.

The volunteers do all of this because they have a great deal of personal energy, they like their work, and they rest well with some sense of accomplishment. And they do all of this with an easy sense of confidence in themselves and their fellow-workers, a sense that often appears best to characterize the democratic spirit of the Americans - as chauvinistic as that sounds.

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One of the classic stories of the fast-growing folklore of the Peace Corps in Malaysia best illustrates the impact of this spirit. A young road surveyor who made quite a hit in the small community where he worked was given a farewell dinner on the eve of his departure. Brandy flowed with characteristic ease and the 90 odd guests became maudlin and tearful as the evening wore on. Tears flowed as easily as the speeches out of bronzed faces. One engineer summed up Ernie's impact this way. "Ernie's a d__ good road surveyor....but there are plenty of good road surveyors. What I remember best about Ernie is that I never really understood what democracy meant till I met him. He mixed with the lowest and the highest. He wasn't too good for anybody; he'd go to anybody's house to eat with them, whatever little or much they had to offer. He'd talk with anybody, work with anybody and help anybody and we were all the same to him."

After the exposure of this conference, I began once again to go over what I have heard about the Peace Corps. Now I recall more than one surprised comment by Malaysians at the economic position of the volunteers. Many informants have been puzzled by the knowledge that the volunteers can earn far more at home than they earn here. Malaysians have long experienced Westerners who come here to raise their standards of living, an experience that supports the still largely latent anti-Western sentiment here. They have seldom experienced people who reduce their standards of living in order to come to work for a few years. (Military and missionary service are similar in some ways, but differ in respect to the "voluntary" nature and the goals of service.) All of this brought me to a new assessment of the impact the volunteers are having on Malaysia. In their apparently boundless energy, in their desire to get a job done, and in their general and genuine friendliness, the volunteers are providing new standards by which Malaysians can judge activity.

One should not overestimate either the magnitude or the uniqueness of this impact. The approximately 170 volunteers Malaysia has experienced are too small a group to have a dramatic impact. More important, however, is the observation that the quality of the impact is not totally unique, but this only makes the impact greater because it supports other significant forces at work here. Through the rural development program and through the gradual advancement of the economy, more and more emphasis is being placed upon achievement, upon the ability to perform tasks, to get the job done. Though these organized forces are still limited to parts of the Government and the private sector, I am convinced that they are some of the major forces Malaysia is now experiencing.

Thus the volunteers may take some comfort in the realization that their frustrations are a part of the growing pains of a society that is definitely in transition, as much signs of healthy change as they are personal irritants.

Sincerely,

Gayle D. Ness

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Received in New York November 12, 1963.