

Celebrating Deepavali helps to strengthen racial ties

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Article

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THE National Deepavali Open House held last Sunday was reportedly an overwhelming success. Taking place so soon after Hari Raya Aidilfitri, the event served to further unite Malaysians culturally and otherwise.

This is to be followed by Christmas and the Chinese New Year as part of the on-going spirit of muhibah.

Deepavali, or the Festival of Lights, like festivities of other faiths, belongs to all Malaysians, cutting across all ethnic boundaries nationwide.

The emphasis is always on sharing one's culture and traditions as invaluable parts of the Malaysian diverse tapestry. It is meant to forge closer rapport between the peoples of this country.

Symbolically, the Festival of lights provides the extra light that would brighten up the future of multiculturalism in this country.

This is in stark contrast with what took place in other places where extra security had to be deployed for the festivities.

A case in point is India where the festival is better known as Diwali. Observed as a major national event celebrated by many people there, the occasion has its downside.

According to the international news agency, AFP, the Indian authorities had to take extra precautions ahead of the festival to avoid a repeat of deadly bomb attacks in the capital that took place two years ago.

In 2005, three bombs at crowded markets ahead of Diwali, killed more than 60 people and caused injuries to more than 180 others.

As such, this year, dog squads were mobilised to check on the markets, while commandos were posted at transport hubs and terminals.

Public places and houses of worship were closely policed. Fortunately, there was no report of any untoward incident.

Further south in Sri Lanka, where thus far tens of thousands of people have died since civil war started in 1972, the situation was less fortunate. Scores continued to die in a fight between the government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels. It erupted in the government-held area of the Jaffna peninsula.

In other places, the defence ministry placed hundreds of police and paramilitary guards, especially in the south, amid fear of more attacks.

And as though to serve as a stern reminder, at the same time in the Hague, the flame that lighted the spirit of Deepavali was totally doused.

Not because there were virtually no Hindus in the city, but rather because the UN court was in session to hear an alleged case of "ethnic cleansing" carried out by a Serbian ultra-nationalist, Vojislav Seselj.

He was charged with crimes against humanity and war crimes, including the murder and torture committed by his volunteer troops during the 1990s Balkan wars.

He is specifically accused of forming a joint criminal enterprise with the late Slobodan Milosevic to "ethnically cleanse" large parts of Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia's northern Vojvodina region.

Malaysia, in this regard, must not take for granted that the peaceful situation for the Festival of Lights and other festivals will remain the same all the time.

By insisting on taking the law into our own hands, we may be contributing to the break-up of our society over the long-term.

This would be most regrettable, especially when we have not exhausted all peaceful avenues available to us. As has often been said, it is easier to destroy than to build.

While we have been most successful in the last 50 years of nation-building, we are not sure what the next 50 years will bring until the same wisdom prevails.

In other words, in order to sustain the light beyond just Deepavali, much more is needed.

We need that extra light to shine from our hearts and that extra sincerity which will draw and instil even closer confidence among the diverse peoples.

This is something that we can sense from the presidential speech given by the prime minister at the recent Umno general assembly, a day after Deepavali.

According to the prime minister, "harmony among the various communities and religions in Malaysia is not an optional luxury—it is a necessity. We have no choice".

In fact, well before that, he was quoted as saying: "Be respectful of other faiths and beliefs, especially when dealing with religious sensitivities. We have to be moderate when discussing religious matters." (NST, Nov 1).

The significance of these words is staggering, not only because it is true for Malaysians but also for citizens of this troubled world.

The time has come for us to grow up and wise up for the sake of future generations, and be engaged in bringing about change in a peaceful manner.

To all Hindu readers, wishing you a belated Deepavali!

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