National Defence University of Malaysia (UPNM)

An exclusive report to be distributed with ***THE INDEPENDENT***

Transcript of the interview with:

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Vice Chancellor

(WORLD REPORT): As an introduction, please provide our readers with an overview of the National Defence University here in Malaysia.

(UPNM): I would like to go beyond history to give you a grounding of what the National Defence University (NDU) is in Malaysia. Education is one of the other agencies that during the British times was able to change social landscape of the nation. The military is one of the other agencies. The British formed the Federation Military College, later known as the Royal Military College. They selected 12 students from the three main races. They knew that when independence was granted, the social landscape would be from these three races, Malay, Chinese and Indian. This group of 12 was sent to Sandhurst. Although the armed forces were formed in 1933, educating in a structured manner only came in the early 1950s. This group came back and formed the Federation Regiment. In 1933 when we started the armed forces it was the Royal Malay Regiment because of the Malay dominance of the country. By early 1950 they'd formed the Federation Regiment consisting of Chinese, Indians and Malays. We found that this was useful. This was the first time in the history of Malaysia that three races could walk, talk and fight together. They found that we are capable of producing a chemistry to help the young nation to grow and be a multiracial society.

With that nucleus, the armed forces saw an opportunity to have our own Officer's Corp. Royal Military College later on broke from the Boys Wing which only trained young Malays who were economically below the poverty line but had the brain in order to be brought here, housed, fed and educated properly, and later on join the Officer's Corp. They formed the Royal Malay Officer Cadet Wing and from then on we have produced our own officers. It is too expensive to send them to Sandhurst or to Eton. After a while the Navy and the Air Force found that they were capable of having their own schools. They broke from here, which is dominated by the Army. Now we have the Navy College and the Air Force College. As you know we are the only country in the world that defeated communists and terrorists in 1989, in which our model had been used by the Americans, British and agencies all over the world. We found that this was time for us to look at uplifting the knowledge and bringing in new people so that they would be the soldiers of the 21st century.

The idea of a knowledge-based army comes in with the national aspiration of having a knowledge-based economy. The government said, let us have our own tertiary level cadets. We formed the military academy in 1995. However we do not have the literature of a tertiary level education. So we did training with university technology in Johor, Malaysia. In 2005 after evaluating the cadets, we found that they have two identities; one as a cadet and at the same time they are still at university. So how can we bring those together? The university aims at everything from the neck up while the armed forces focus on everything from teeth to toe. Through clever organisation from the Ministry of Defence and the current Prime Minister – who was the Minister of Defence at that time –the National Defence University was established. The university is under the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE); however, the utility of the curriculum is given to the Ministry of Defence.

(WORLD REPORT): So you are run by the Ministry of Defence but you are under MOHE?

(UPNM): We are fully under MOHE. However, the military culture must be strong in this university because we are going to produce military leaders. The two ministries agreed to have a joint committee to discuss the requirements. That really distinguishes our university from the rest of the NDUs in the world. This is a unique combination and everybody is looking at us as to how we manage this.

(WORLD REPORT): You train the military leaders of the future but you are also open to civilians.

(UPNM): Yes we have 20% civilians. We have 20% civilians because if it is absolute, we will learn nothing from it. We bring civilian culture in order to bring in some of the real world and exposure to how civilian culture behaves. Out there whether you are working in a completely civilian environment or a completely military environment, absolute power corrupts absolutely. Absolutely is no good. That is the beauty of it. Nevertheless, Malaysia is clever by putting the NDU under MOHE because we want to maintain the credentials of a higher institution. You know very well that if you put it under the Ministry of Defence, education may ultimately fall second in line to training. We must remind them of both. Then we came up with the philosophy that one of the best training is tertiary education in the work. Our university departs from other universities in other parts of the world because our philosophy is to produce intellectual leaders of character.

(WORLD REPORT): I understand the interest in having 20% civilians with 80% military is to give a feel of the real world. What message do you send to civilians in order to attract them to a military institution?

(UPNM): We have the Reserve Officers Training Units (ROTU), which all of the civilians join. They are very willing to come in. The good thing is that to come to this university one has to apply through the MOHE system, not the Ministry of Defence system. We take the best. We are oversubscribed by 24,000. We can only take 500 but 25,000 ask to join. We only take those who put our university as their number one choice. Out of that 25,000, we only call 1,000 for the

seven-day final interview. It is a long interview because they have got to do their military aptitude test. We call them to a military centre in which the Ministry of Defence's recruiting team will come with us and we do all of the various I.Q. and leadership tests. Only if they pass do we register them as officer cadet. We are the only university in this country that pays the students to study. They join as an officer cadet. They report six weeks earlier than the rest of their civilian counterparts of which we only take 500. There are about 400 cadets and 80 to 100 civilians. They also have to pass the military selection; however, because of the quota we say that if you want to come, you come as a civilian. However you have the chance to join us by joining ROTU. At the end of their studies all of them will be commissioned into the Armed Forces. However pure cadets will join the armed forces whereas the civilians will join the reserves units. All in all they have that flexibility for the civilians. They join and then they come six weeks earlier for an officer cadet induction course, in which you change from a boy to a man, and a man to a soldier. After they pass the induction course, they become officer cadets and they register as students of the university. Here we have one compulsory foundation year followed by three years for a non-engineering degree, or another four years for engineering. That is our structure.

Our semester is two plus one, meaning two economic semesters and one military semester. That short semester is for those who have got to repeat. But the rest will do their military training. The military training part of it is under the Ministry of Defence in order to follow their standards. At the same time, the learning outcome based education is approved by the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA). The military training is also cognitive in nature. For example, if we talk about leadership we will be bringing in the lessons learned first, followed by the training to be done. I am so excited to see that happening now and it works very well. That invites a lot of visitors from all over to come and see us. Some countries are asking if they can send their cadets here. In July of next year we are going to offer our first intake for overseas students. At the moment for this intake we are looking at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) first. The reason being is that we want to learn. We do not want to bite off more than we can chew. That is very important in education. We do not want to have this strategy of trial and error. We are going to bring all of the ASEAN

countries first, size it up and, God willing, by 2012 we are open to the rest of the world.

(WORLD REPORT): As you know research and development (R&D) is a very important aspect of the military. Many of the aspects that we use today have come from the military. As a military academy, how important are R&D and engineering courses?

(UPNM): We are only two and a half years old. We initiated the National Defence Research Council (NDRC) for R&D. In principle the Ministry of Defence agreed to have that council. We came up with our blueprint and within this military research we saw an opportunity. All of the degree projects should be on this. For example a degree student has got to do a project on R&D. The project should be based in the R&D blueprint requirement. In this way, once the project is commissioned, its usefulness is known. For example, three engineering students did a project on our new PT-91 tanks. This is going to be our presentation to the team during the commissioning in January. Of the R&D that we are looking at, I am not able to tell you what sort of R&D items there are. But we have six clusters of defence areas in which the Malaysia Defence Industry Council (MDIC) has already put in. Now we have done our workshop and over 20 defence companies have come in including such major players as Astronautic Technology Sdn Bhd (ATSB). Hopefully with our model of R&D we coin the notion of a collaboration model. No way could the university do R&D by itself. At the end of the day it becomes an academic exercise and the utility of the product is not there. This was our initial fear.

If you want to do R&D you have to make sure that the utility of that R&D is there. For example, we had an experience where a student came up with a suggestion to do R&D on capturing ship images using radar. When he drew up his R&D plan it was all fine. However, when we asked what was the distance of his radar, on a ship or land-based, he said land-based. And how far could the radar capture the ships image? Five kilometres. That is nothing. For the academy he passes all of the requirements but in a military sense five kilometres in nothing. That is just an example I am using to demonstrate that

utility is very important. It is not just an academic exercise. We must consider the utility. That is the reason why we want collaboration. The people out there will be able to tell us what niche areas and gaps in defence capabilities we should be looking at. The other thing is the tropicalisation of equipment. Not many countries in the world are doing that so that is another area. Especially in optronics, most countries are having problems with humidity levels. Those are the areas in which we can do a lot.

(WORLD REPORT): Whilst I was researching this interview, I realised that tomorrow there is a conference about defence and education, which are very important aspects of your activities.

(UPNM): This country understands that the armed forces are always doing their job well professionally. Number one, they are apolitical. About a year ago a professional company ran a survey of all the organisations in this country. Out of 16 organisations, we were ranked number one. The emphasis has always been on education as the first line of defence. It goes back to my earlier statement when I said that the armed forces saw that a knowledge-based army is very, very important. It is very early in our modernisation plan. We cannot live in our own aura of the past without including the tertiary aspect of it. The government spent a lot. If you reach the rank of Major and you do not have a Master's degree you do not fit in the system. More than 50% of Major's have a Master's degree. We are not paper chasing but that is how it is now. The armed forces offer a postgraduate that you can opt to do: a Master's degree in Defence. Tomorrow our objective is to tell the country that the military has the physical capability of defending the nation, however soldiers must be educated enough to be able to defend themselves, their community and their country. That is basically the interest of the seminar. One of the topics of the seminar is that education is power. If we look at it from the Islamic perspective, the first time the angel came to the Prophet Muhammad, it was to ask him to read. But the Prophet Muhammad, he himself, is illiterate. But when the angel grabbed him and told him to read, he was able to. That shows that reading and education is very, very important. When you read you understand more than

from listening. I will be presenting a paper on military education and nation building.

(WORLD REPORT): It is clear that there is an aim and goal of the nation to position itself as an education hub of the region. Now in more academic terms than in military ones, how do you see Malaysia positioning itself in the last 10 years as an education hub and where do you see the role of this university playing in the spectrum of different offers?

(UPNM): I will look at the overall strategy first. As you know, higher education has 13 critical areas of performance (CAPs). Everyday I check that we have our key performance indicators (KPIs). Out of the 13 we cover about 12. One of the CAPs is employability but we are not worried about that. From day one all of our students are employable. The next step the government took was to look at the law for higher education. There has been a lot of liberalisation in the education law because of the nature of the nation in the past where we had communist terrorists. The government saw that we must allow the students to participate in and understand the culture of debate. The Minister of Higher Education also suggested that in every university there must be a Speaker's Corner. I am planning to have one here in December. However with regards to the ethics of the speaker, you must be responsible for what you say. That shows that the government is going for liberalisation that you never thought of before. You cannot go to the area of sensitivity such as race relations, religion or commenting on an individual. With that I think the students have the ability to participate.

The second thing is to allow for a student council. In our case, we have elections even though we are in uniform. We told them they could participate in student council and vote. In the military there are no elections. It is by direction. However, we ask them to learn politics even though you should not be political. I will be the first one to make you suffer if you bring politics in here. They must understand what politics is. The next thing we have done is to ensure that every student has one elective language. We offer six languages including French, Spanish and Arabic because this officer will be deployed to Lebanon, where

they speak Arabic and maybe South America, where they speak Spanish and elsewhere. What the government is doing is very attractive. Even the Minister has his own blog and Facebook. I, as a military man, said this is ridiculous. How are you going to answer 200 questions a day? But they still have all of that. I think we have totally changed the landscape for Malaysian politicians. Now the Prime Minister himself talks to everybody in the tertiary industry. If you go down to see your people, you should behave as they do. It used to be that politicians would go to the villages wearing beautiful clothes, but not anymore. Now politicians must be with the people. There is a paradox there. There are two groups of people in the country: one that understands the utility of information technology (IT), and the young generation who likes to be on the screen all of the time. They are about 30 per cent and that literature actually changed the whole landscape, including tertiary education.

As for our market, I was told that we are targeting 80,000 students by 2015. Now we have got about 70,000. The countries that come here to do tertiary education are from Africa and the Middle East. They come here for the culture and as they say, Malaysia is truly Asia. You get everything here. You have the Malays, Indians, Chinese and the Japanese. However we have problems. I was about 100 metres from one of the buses that blew up in London on 7/7 so I understand. I was staying in Kingston commuting to Edgware Road, changing two buses every day. When that happened I could understand how the British felt. The entire area was shut down and it took about four hours to get back. The college arranged for a bus to bring us back. My wife was crying the entire time because we could not use any phones. Everything was blocked.

(WORLD REPORT): Listening to your words, you are clearly an Ambassador for Malaysia. You have been in London and New Zealand.

(UPNM): That was a two-year exchange.

(WORLD REPORT): What is your perception when you travel around and speak about Malaysia? Do you believe that people have the right

perception of Malaysia? If not, do you think that the investment in higher education will help in changing this perception?

(UPNM): As you know in today's world 'Islamophobia' is the agenda. But one thing that I am very proud of is that if they talk about Islam, they always use us as a model. I have been seen as an ambassador for all of the Muslim participants. Whenever there is an issue I will be in the forefront to talk. You know the paradox of the Arab is that they talk as if Islam was theirs. Most people around the world, when you say Islam, always think of people with long beards. Here in Malaysia we do not need to wear anything. I go to pray. I am liberal. I follow the Islamic rules and regulations. But maybe other participants are extreme right or extreme left. You cannot see them in the middle. There was a series I like about an Indian population who lived in London for 10 years but who could not speak a word of English. That is a classic example of the social issues in the United Kingdom. Because the trademark is liberal Muslim I think Malaysia has the capacity. We have not been seen as a nation that propagates terrorism or any extremism. We are seen to be a very regimented society. Especially among the Arab world, they look at us as the most progressive and most cultured. At the tertiary level our target at the moment is the Middle East and Africa. However we may have to do a lot of work for the Europeans and Americans. Some of them do not know where Malaysia is. They know Singapore and Thailand.

(WORLD REPORT): Clearly higher education is a way to put Malaysia on the world map. Talking here I have seen your motto "Duty, Honour, Integrity." How important are these words to the new cadets or civilian students coming in to your organisation?

(UPNM): As you know we are only 52 years old. Before I answer that I have had a big debate with a British colleague at the Royal College of Defence Studies (RCDS). They are talking about the disparity of cultures and civilisations and I think that is how they came up with this theory about the "clash of civilisations." One of the things we have been discussing, especially in Southeast Asia, is that the physical advancement of the country and the

environment is so fast that we are almost at par with our European counterparts. We have the PETRONAS Twin Towers and the airport; we can match London. However, to a certain extent our people may not have that first class mentality because they are not exposed. Secondly because of the civilisation and the culture and it has been 200 years since the Treaty of Westphalia. That is a big thing to us. We have 52 years versus 200 of our culture and civilisation. We have a lot of work to do. Literature-wise, we can write and speak but we have difficulty doing it. That is our social landscape. How do you want to transform this so when people come here they have the mentality "Duty, Honour and Integrity"? There are two ways to do that. One is by coercion; the other is by persuasion. They have that at West Point, the Thayer System. It has been a long secret for many, many years. We are looking at that.

That is why we need that six-week induction. Before they join the university we must tell them, I do not care what you do as a civilian but when you come here, if I say 0600 hours sharp, you are there, otherwise you will be punished. We bring all of them to one level. They grow up together so they have fraternity. We found that it works. For the Muslims we put some spiritual elements to it. For Indians and others we ask them to go to the church or temple. We say that if the mosque prays, the temple prays and the church prays, that is a mass. Our national ethic number one is that everyone should have a religion. This is different from other countries where religion is your own business. Worldview is another issue over here. One of the other things we are talking about is the issue of space. We are still working out the physical and mental space. We are a classic living example of unity in diversity. There are discussions all of the time but we respect each other. You do not have those types of experiences in any other country. They believe that religion is something else. In Europe religion is only 3% of their livelihood. Only 3% go to church: to be baptised, to marry and to die.

(WORLD REPORT): I would like to finalise the interview by inviting you to address a message to the more than one million readers of *The Independent*. They are going to look at this report on Malaysia and see a

big section on education. When it comes to your university, if there was a message you would like to convey, what would that message be?

(UPNM): If people look at Sandhurst and West Point as an example of producing fine military gentlemen, we have a niche whereby we produce fine gentlemen with a different ingredient from the East. I do not see any other Eastern NDUs offering this sort of package. We are trying hard. It is an uphill battle. We are always telling the cadets to have integrity and a sense of urgency, and focus on that. That is why we are focusing on producing intellectual leaders of character. I do not define that character; the cadets individually must define that character. The profiling, as long as you have that angle of tolerance, you are an officer and a gentleman. If people ask me to define a gentleman I cannot. That fine line is that only when they behave, communicate and socialise can we say who is a gentleman. It is intangible. We are looking at producing that fine gentleman, like Sandhurst and West Point produce, but we have the Eastern ingredient.

(WORLD REPORT): Thank you very much for your comments.