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<td>Ahmad Rejal Arbee</td>
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A Profile Of BERNAMA

By

Ahmad Rejal Arbee
BERNAMA, which stands for Pertubuhan Berita Nasional Malaysia (National News Agency of Malaysia), was set up by the Malaysian Parliament in 1967. Its main aim is to provide news on an objective and impartial basis. It began operation in a modest way on May 20, 1968, covering only the capital, Kuala Lumpur.

BERNAMA started with only a handful of journalists recruited from local newspapers, Radio Malaysia and secondary school leavers. Since then, it has expanded—both in area and scope.

Today, BERNAMA has bureaus and state representative offices in the capitals of all the country's 13 states. A few district offices in the two big states of Sabah and Sarawak are manned by staff correspondents while a network of stringers feed the agency with local news and events. BERNAMA also stationed its own staff correspondents in all the ASEAN capitals (except Brunei), beginning with the opening of a Jakarta office in 1971.

Coupled with the expansion of coverage in terms of areas, it also expanded the scope of its services with the inclusion of a full-fledged foreign news service this July. The service, operating on a 75 baud wire, is on 24 hours a day. The foreign service moves an average of anything between 40,000 to 70,000 words daily, selected from Reuters, AP, UPI, AFP. It also includes items from DPA (West Germany), ANSA (Italy), Kyodo, ANTARA, PNA, TNA, PTI, Saudi Press Agency, the International Islamic News Agency, OANA, Qatar News Agency, WAM of the United Arab Emirates, as well as files from BERNAMA's own correspondents in the ASEAN and its stringer in London.

This service also moves about 10,000 words of Malaysian news items overseas to other news agencies that have bilateral links with BERNAMA.
Since July 1984, it has also expanded the scope of its economic news coverage with the inclusion of foreign items selected from the Reuters Business Wire, Reuters Commodity Report, Reuters Money Report, Unicom and other foreign wire agencies. This service is provided both through the wire (for media subscribers) and in bulletin form (for most of the non-media subscribers) which is distributed twice a day.

BERNAMA's major service is the Domestic Service which provides its subscribers with national news and features either in Bahasa Malaysia and English. These items, which on average number anything between 160 to 200 items or the equivalent of 40,000 words or more, are moved over another 75 baud wire to subscribers. There are a total of 31 daily Malaysian newspapers, Radio and TV Malaysia, international wires agencies, and five daily newspapers in Singapore which subscribe to BERNAMA.

Items moved over this service are also printed in bulletin form for distribution to non-media subscribers. These subscribers include some foreign embassies, commercial organisations, libraries, research organisations, etc...

To meet its expanding operations, BERNAMA has to continuously recruit personnel. From a start of about a dozen or so journalists, it now has a staff of 180 journalists. For a number of years, BERNAMA has not been able to fill all the editorial slots available because of frequent staff resignations and a difficulty in getting qualified journalists. Despite a very dynamic recruitment exercise last year, it recruited only 26 journalists. This year, it has recruited 31 journalists so far.

Compounding this problem is the high turn-over rate of BERNAMA's experienced staff. This year alone, it has so far lost 20 journalists, including a chief news editor, a chief sub-editor and three news editors. Last year, it lost a total of 21 journalists mainly to the private sector and other media.

What this boils down to is that BERNAMA has to continue replenishing its experienced staff with new recruits—i.e., fresh university graduates and school leavers who have to be properly trained before they can be usefully employed as journalists. This has become almost a vicious circle, as if BERNAMA is a training ground for journalists.

One reason why BERNAMA journalists seem to be in demand is that they are largely bilingual. Because of the nature of the BERNAMA service, our reporters are expected to be able to write equally well in both Bahasa Malaysia and English. The brief to BERNAMA reporters when they go out to cover news is that they must write their stories in the language of origin. If the event covered is conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, then the reporter must
report it in Bahasa Malaysia. If the event covered is conducted in English, then his story must be in English.

Of late, BERNAMA has been having difficulty in getting journalists who are proficient in both languages. Because of this we had to resort to conducting English lessons—with the help of the British Council—for those who are not well-versed in the language. I feel this will be a continuing process since most of the school leavers and graduates of local universities nowadays are quite weak in English.

With such a high turn-over rate, BERNAMA has to continuously conduct training courses for its staff. It has its own in-house training programme.

All new recruits are given a one-month induction and basic journalism course conducted by the training officer with the help of some retired journalists and senior BERNAMA deskmen. This crash course is followed by on-the-job training for six months. These cadets are given follow-up refresher courses after they have been on the job for a year.

Thus, the current BERNAMA management places a lot of emphasis on training and accepts whatever offers there are for training, whether locally or overseas. This is also the reason why it is now active in undertaking various journalism training courses. It has co-sponsored courses in population reporting with the Press Foundation of Asia, in science reporting with the Canadian International Development Research Centre and in a one-month training course for ASEAN news agency journalists sponsored by the ASEAN Committee of Culture and Information. And as the secretariat for the Organisation of Asian News Agencies, it is organising two training programmes—in economic writing to be held at the Bangladesh Press Institute starting on Nov. 17 and a photojournalism course to be held with ANTARA in Indonesia starting on Nov. 26.

Some of the problems that Malaysian news organisations face, particularly BERNAMA, can be listed as follows:

1. Lack of a sense of commitment to the profession. No loyalty to the profession.
2. Some journalists seem disinterested in the profession, looking at it as a mere job they have to do and so they lack the sense of pride of being a member of an honorable profession.
3. Reporting is seen just as a stepping stone to a more lucrative career in non-media organisations.
4. Too impatient to go up.
5. Some seem to think they know everything and so they hardly exert any effort to learn.
6. Poor reading habits. Something needs to be done to get journalist to read. Some do not even read the
newspapers before reporting for duty and will only read the newspapers when in the office.

These are some of the problems that news organisations are facing in Malaysia. I would like to know what participants from other countries have to say on this and maybe offer some solution to the problems.