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VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Datuk Noor Farida Ariffin

Key:

SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

NFA: Datuk Noor Farida Ariffin (Respondent)

SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Datuk Noor Farida Ariffin in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday, 13th May 2014. Datuk Farida, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to take part in the project.

NFA: A pleasure.

SO: Please, I wonder if you could begin by saying how you came to be recruited to the Commonwealth Secretariat in the late 1980s.

NFA: I remember in 1987, I was then the President of the Association of Women Lawyers in Malaysia and we organised – through the offices of the Commonwealth Secretariat – a large meeting on violence against women. At that time, Jane Connors, who was a lecturer at the Law Faculty of SOAS, arranged through the Women and Development programme of the Commonwealth Secretariat to provide us with a resource person in the form of Sergeant Bob Holmes from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. He was a trainer in violence against women issues from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. So, we brought him in, and together with our national level workshop we also arranged for him to train our police officers at the police college on how to deal with violence against women, and how the police and the medical profession should deal with them – how they should treat victims of sexual assault, rape and so on and so forth.

Jane also came along with Bob for our training and for this national level workshop. At that time, I was very active. I was a women's rights activist on top of also being a legal officer with the Attorney General's Chambers. But we were very, very active, and a number of women's groups got together to launch a campaign against violence against women. This culminated in this big national level workshop. It was very successful, with Bob Holmes' involvement through the Commonwealth Secretariat, through the WDP, in our efforts to tackle violence. Dorianne Rowan Campbell – she was the first the

first director of WDP, of course – had decided and had already announced her intention to retire. So, they were then looking for a successor, and so [when] Jane got back to London, she mentioned my name. Jane recommended me, basically.

SO: Excellent. So, you had come with the recommendation of Jane Connors rather than your government?

NFA: Yes. Then what I did was [that] Jane asked me to apply, which I did. I applied directly to ComSec for this position, and then I was called for an interview. I was interviewed, I remember; it was quite interesting. Then they announced a few weeks later that they had offered me the position, and only then did I inform my government that I had got the job. I wrote to the Public Services Department for a secondment, because they had offered me a three year contract. Well, I had already accepted it. Then I made arrangements to go to ComSec on secondment from the Malaysian government, because I did not want to burn my boats at that time.

SO: What was the response of your government when you first explained that you'd like to take up this position, but on secondment?

NFA: They were very supportive. Well, I went through the proper channels, made the application, and they approved it.

SO: So, this is in 1987, after the October 1986 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ISIS [Institute of Strategic and International Studies] reports on whether Malaysia should stay in the Commonwealth, and on the relative value of the Commonwealth.

NFA: Yes; yes.

SO: Were you aware of that discussion taking place within your government about the value of the Commonwealth?

NFA: At that time, no. Only later, when I joined the Foreign Ministry, was I aware of it.

SO: So, when was that?

NFA: I joined the Foreign Ministry immediately after I came back from the Commonwealth Secretariat. That was in 1993, but again, it was a secondment from the judicial legal service.

SO: So, you were appointed in 1987 and came to London in January '88?

NFA: January '88, correct.

SO: What was the position of Women and Development within the Secretariat at that particular time?

NFA: Well, it was a unit, basically part of the HRDG – the Human Resource Development Group. We had education, we had health, we had youth... Raja Gomez, I remember, was the director. Peter Williams was Director of

Education. And Kihumbu Thairu was head of Health, and then Mohan Kaul was head of the Industrial Development unit. So, there were five units in the HRDG, and we reported directly to Moni Malhoutra as Assistant Secretary General.

SO: How central was Women and Development to the Secretariat's work at that particular time? What importance was attached to these issues by the Commonwealth Secretary General Sonny Ramphal?

NFA: Well, it was something so new, you see. Dorianne, I thought, did a marvellous job of really raising the profile of women and development. And she had already done all this: she had created this base. What I did was simply to build on it. But it was very difficult, because it was still something very new. The most important thing she did was to try to mainstream gender issues into the work – not just the divisions and the departments of the Secretariat, but also Commonwealth-wide. So, what I did, as I said, was simply to build on this work. That was the main focus of our work. And also, at that time, the UN had adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW. We did a lot of work, as well, promoting the CEDAW Commonwealth-wide.

SO: What was the principal source of funding? Was this associated with CFTC, or was this a separate developmental budget?

NFA: No, no, it came from the ComSec. But [for] certain projects that we had, we would have to seek our own funds. I remember, at that time, [that] our most fervent supporter was the Canadian government because gender was such a big thing in the government's policy. So, they were very, very supportive of all our efforts. Every two years we had these meetings of women ministers or ministers of women's affairs. I remember they hosted the 1991 Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministerial Meeting. We managed to get funding for some of the ministers from the less developed Commonwealth countries to attend.

SO: So, this was really ground-breaking, pioneering work that you were doing?

NFA: Well, we tried anyway, even though, of course – let's face it, Sue – there's a lot of lip service. There's a lot of lip service. But we soldiered on. We tried our best. At that time, it was still something new. It's only now, because the UN has attached so much importance to it – they created UN Women and so on, they had an ex-president of Chile to head it – that it's become something big, and all governments have to make regular reports. But at that time, you may say it was ground-breaking, because we required reports from each and every government at the ministerial meeting on what they had done to integrate women's issues into their policies.

SO: Were these clearly identified as women's issues? There must have been a great deal of cross-fertilisation with human rights issues, and the work of the Human Rights Unit?

NFA: Unfortunately, no. We didn't see women's rights as human rights at that time. It was only much later. Especially when CEDAW was already full, you know...

It was only when the CEDAW committee required governments of member states to give their reports – and then of course they built up their jurisprudence through the CEDAW reports and so on – that women's rights were seen as human rights, as part of general human rights. But at that time, we were very compartmentalised. We did not work together, unfortunately, with the Human Rights Division – HRD – which was, again, a unit of the Political Affairs Department.

SO: In these early days of identifying women's rights, were these seen as reproductive rights? Were they seen as political rights? What categories of rights did you identify that particularly needed to be supported in the realm of women affairs?

NFA: Well, it was, as I said, political rights, basically. And what was important is that, for example, at the Secretariat level, every division, every department, had to give an annual report on the efforts they'd made in integrating gender issues into their policies, and into their advice to Commonwealth governments. Also, at the meeting of women's ministers, they had to come up with the reports as well on the governments' success and the progress they'd made in integrating gender issues into mainstream policies.

SO: In your experience, then, was there any degree of sanction beyond peer group pressure upon member governments? What levers could be used to try to ensure that they didn't just pay lip service, as you say, but actually started to implement what they said they were going to do?

NFA: Unfortunately there were no such sanctions. At that time it was basically promotional work. But the fact that they had to report, I suppose, acted as some kind of an incentive for them – to give good reports. And what we also did was we encouraged all governments to have a women's focal point. We worked to promote the establishment of women's focal points by governments – whether it was at departmental level, unit level, or full-fledged ministries – and also implemented the Commonwealth plan of action on women and development.

SO: So, there was a degree of domestic observation on whether the governments were simply just producing declarations on paper or were actually implementing them. So, were there particular areas of your activities? Before I turned on the tape recorder, you mentioned that you had specific projects. Did you adopt a developmental country approach? Were there regional offices and officers that you designated as responsible for overseeing specific projects? How did you manage your workload?

NFA: For those countries who requested assistance on any issues that we were working on, we provided assistance. We went there – both our officers, as well as consultants. We would provide country-level support. But we were not so much regional; [rather], Commonwealth-wide. But yes, we did have a few regional projects. I remember we had a project for Southern Africa. We had it in Zimbabwe.

SO: Was that also to provide them support for women's issues within SWAPO or women's issues within the ANC in exile?

NFA: No, not really. [It was] for Southern Africa as a whole, on women and development and also, if I recall, on the Commonwealth Programme of Action on Women and Development. Then we also worked on specific projects like violence against women, and we also tried to replicate what was done for Malaysia, where we had specific programmes to tackle violence against women and the training of police forces [and] of health authorities and so on in tackling problems regarding rape victims and also to provide sensitive, gender-sensitive, care for the victims of sexual assault.

SO: So, rather than what might be described as a normal, mainstream approach of emphasising gender issues in education, this was actually taking it to a point of human security: providing protection and support for women, and for vulnerable women.

NFA: Yes. But, you know, we had many, many projects. Overall, of course, as a Commonwealth plan of action, the main thing was to make sure that governments, when they formulate policies – whether it was economic policy, health policy, or whatever – that the gender factor was taken into account. But besides that, we also had specific projects on violence against women. And then, as I said, we had other specific projects, because whenever countries requested assistance from us to have specific projects or specific training, we would also provide this training.

SO: You mentioned the particular input of Canada and Malaysia in this. Were you able to take advantage, in any way, of Marlborough House in London? Or was there no crossover between what Britain might or might not have done in terms of advancing women's political and security rights, in terms of health and physical safety?

NFA: We did have a few meetings in Marlborough House, because we also had this project, I remember... At that time, structural development was a very 'in' thing. Remember, so many economies had collapsed, and then the World Bank had imposed very onerous conditions when they assisted countries. Do you remember?

SO: I do, very clearly.

NFA: Yes. When they gave financial assistance to set the economies back on track, the onerous conditions that they imposed... And then, I remember, somebody had written [that] it was called 'Structural Development with a Human Face', do you remember?

SO: Yes, I do. The argument was that structural adjustment's austerity programmes fell disproportionately upon women – particularly girls' access to education and women's access to healthcare.

NFA: Yes. Then we had a Commonwealth expert group on this very issue – on how structural development impacted on women. WDP organised this. We got together gender experts, economic experts, and so on and so forth. We had a three-day meeting, I remember, in Marlborough House, to come up with this report. This was an expert group report, and we came up with a book and in

fact, at the 1991 CHOGM in Harare, we published it and had it distributed. It was a very good report. I wish I had a copy of it still.

SO: There is a copy of it, certainly, in the Secretariat library. Farida, you've used the plural 'we'.

NFA: WDP, yes.

SO: How big was WDP?

NFA: Well, it was very small, unfortunately. It was basically the Director, a deputy director and then only two programme officers, and then the support staff. It was a very, very small unit. At the most, we had two or three programme officers.

SO: How central was it to the Secretariat's work while you were there, for that five-year period?

NFA: It was central, in a sense, only because of the Programme of Action. And because all the units as well as departments, the divisions, had to make a report on what they had done, as I said, on the Programme of Action.

SO: But in terms of Sonny Ramphal's support as the Secretary General when you arrived, how central did you perceive gender issues to be in his grand strategy of development and what he was trying to achieve as SG?

NFA: He tried his best. I think most of them need to be gender sensitised. I think Doriene did a good job with him, because I remember in 1989, when we had the Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting in Jamaica, he invited me to be part of the Commonwealth Secretariat entourage. I can't remember whether the Programme of Action was actually on the agenda or not, but certainly we were there. I was there. He asked me to be there to monitor.

SO: Farida, it's been commented, though, that Sonny Ramphal's management of ComSec was like a series of concentric circles: obviously, the Office of the SG and Political Affairs were perceived to be main drivers.

NFA: Yes, that's right. They were really central, yes.

SO: And that this was not just because of the work each did, but also because of personalities that were particularly valuable in political and personal terms to Sonny. That's just the way he chose to work. But other units and other divisions felt that they had more of a 'satellite status'. Peter Williams definitely felt that.

NFA: Yes. I completely agree with him. As I said, we were basically peripheral to the main work of the Secretariat. But, as I said, there's a lot of lip service. And at that time, gender issues were so new that what we needed to do was basically to gender sensitise our colleagues. A lot of them simply paid lip service to our work.

SO: Farida, how much were you also at an advantage as a Malaysian? This is the era in which Malaysia, particularly, took a prominent position in the work of the Commonwealth. Dr Mahathir proposed to the Vancouver CHOGM [in 1987] that the Malaysian government should host the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, and of course, thereafter, in 1990, offered to host the XVI Commonwealth Games. So, this was an era in which Malaysia was adopting a particularly high profile stance.

NFA: Yes, well, that was one of the reasons I was appointed, because I was a Malaysian. But Malaysia itself, when it comes to gender issues, did not place very much importance on gender issues. We didn't even have a full-fledged women's ministry at that time. Our focal point was in such a bad state. The people who were with Malaysia's focal point, our women's mechanism, did not even understand gender issues themselves. I did hold a few workshops for Malaysia, and really, it was tough going, because they basically did not understand gender issues [and] especially the mainstreaming gender issues. They would work on income-generating projects, that kind of thing. That was what they laid emphasis on. But it was not so much that it was important to national development. They didn't see it as such. So, it was really tough going. Also, Commonwealth-wide, most women's mechanisms were really a two-woman affair.

SO: Did you come back here to Kuala Lumpur for the CHOGM in 1989?

NFA: Yes, I did.

SO: What are your recollections of that meeting?

NFA: Well it was a very enjoyable CHOGM.

SO: Well, it seems the Malaysian government was determined it was not going to be a one issue CHOGM, simply dominated by the debate on South Africa. It was the size of the meeting and the generosity and hospitality of the Malaysian government...

NFA: Yeah, it was a good CHOGM. I thought it was a very good CHOGM.

SO: Was there a perception that Dr Mahathir's attitudes to the CHOGM had undergone a sea change?

NFA: Yes, exactly. When he chaired the CHOGM, I thought the consensus was [that] he did a good job. But at that time, it was John Major who was Foreign Secretary; Margaret Thatcher was there, I remember...

SO: She was, indeed.

NFA: And then, of course, they got rid of her soon after.

SO: In November of 1990. Yes, there was the cabinet 'coup' against her.

NFA: Yes, I remember. John Major was Foreign Secretary. And then, oh my God, I peeped into the closed-door meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, and my God, the issue was South Africa.

SO: The debate between CCFMSA and John Major on economic and financial sanctions against South Africa?

NFA: Gareth Evans used a four-letter word on John Major. Yes, I remember that.

SO: Max Gaylard confirmed that the meeting became particularly heated!

NFA: Yes, it was very heated! And that was his Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans. He didn't mince his words, and used a four-letter word – on Britain!

SO: My goodness.

NFA: And it was so embarrassing, because I was there – I think I was the only woman who was there. One of my colleagues had dragged me there... Was it Moses Anafu?

SO: Yes, probably.

NFA: Probably, because Moses was with PAD at that time.

SO: Without wishing to excuse foul language, I think it was an indication of, first, just how robust the discussion was, and two, the passion with which Gareth Evans felt that Britain was the obstruction against necessary financial sanctions. The Australian government and Australian officials had put an enormous amount of work into developing international financial sanctions against South Africa.

NFA: That's right, yes.

SO: So, the feeling that Britain was the logjam would have been running high.

NFA: Yes. At that time, Abu Hassan Omar was our Minister of Foreign Affairs. Oh, Hassan Omar. Very weak; very weak of him.

SO: Well, from what I've read, Dr Mahathir dominated the conceptualisation and the presentation of foreign policy.

NFA: Foreign policy was in the hands of the Prime Minister, yes.

SO: Yes, with a core of key advisors who supported him and implemented his policy?

NFA: Yes, basically the core advisors were from the Foreign Ministry. It was Kamil Jaafar – it was all the Kedah gang – and Razali Ismail, who was at that time our Permanent Representative [to the United Nations] in New York.

SO: Do you think it was a question of relative weakness of the Foreign Minister, or just the dominant personality and locus of decision-making in the Office of the Prime Minister?

NFA: The latter. The latter, yes. Foreign Ministers would have the duty of simply implementing his policies, but [Dr Mahathir] decided what our foreign policy should be.

SO: So, had there been surprise when Mahathir seemed to have this change of heart towards the Commonwealth? At the start of his premiership, the tone was very much that he might go to the regional meetings of the Commonwealth – the CHOGRMs – but that he certainly wouldn't go to the biennial heads' meetings because these were dominated by Europeans and were insufficiently focused on development countries. Is this correct, in your view?

NFA: Yes, yes.

SO: So, Dr Mahathir believed the Commonwealth needed to be much more of a caucus of developing countries. Do you know how Sonny Ramphal managed to persuade him otherwise? Was there domestic discussion of how Malaysia's foreign policy had altered?

NFA: Yes. I don't know who was responsible, but I think it was probably his advisors – basically the Foreign Ministry people – who felt the Commonwealth was important. I think they were the ones who were instrumental in making him change his mind.

SO: How important was ISIS as a quasi-governmental think-tank?

NFA: It was more the likes of Kamil Jaafar and Razali Ismail. They were more instrumental.

SO: Thank you. I know the two reports that came out in the October of 1986, and the literature seems to put a lot of emphasis on the particular role of ISIS.

NFA: No, it was the Foreign Ministry, because they had direct access to him. Not academics and not think tanks.

SO: So, the Kuala Lumpur heads meeting was a very successful CHOGM, from which emerged the Langkawi Declaration.

NFA: Yes, on the environment.

SO: The meeting discussed South Africa, but there were also forty other important issues, particularly the environment. The Langkawi Declaration stated that developed countries should start to financially contribute to minimizing the impact on the environment of industrialisation in developing countries.

How far was there a degree of domestic press support and popularity for the Commonwealth in Malaysia? This was a time when, after all, Dr

Mahathir experienced considerable political opposition within the country.

NFA: In 1987, yes, because of Operation Lalang, when they rounded up the so-called government dissidents. In fact, some of my friends came and stayed with me in London just to escape. I was very active as an NGO as well; I was wearing two hats. So, I think Irene Fernandez and others came and stayed with me, because the Special Branch was out to get them.

SO: Did that complicate your position in ComSec?

NFA: No, not at all. [*Laughter*] It complicated my position at home! So, that's why I felt I needed a breather. And of course, I was frozen out; they put me in cold storage. I did not get my promotion, even though I felt I was a relatively good legal officer. But the Attorney General hauled me up, summoned me, and said, "You cannot wear two hats. You've got to decide." I was making statements against the Internal Security Act and what not. ComSec in London didn't know, they didn't know anything about it. They did not delve into my political activism at home.

SO: You said that you were leading an NGO. Which was that?

NFA: The Association of Women Lawyers. Of course, we had a petition against the Internal Security Act – detention without trial and so on. Also, after 1987, it was a very, very bad time for NGOs. They rounded up the NGOs when actually the troublemakers were Najib Razak and this guy from the Malaysian Chinese Association – they almost came to blows, and they were partners in the National Front, in a coalition government. And what happened was the police started to round up NGOs instead of Najib and this guy – I can't remember his name – who should have been rounded up as they were trying to play to the gallery.

SO: So, this was scapegoating?

NFA: Definitely scapegoating.

SO: But by 1989, politics had become calmer here in Malaysia?

NFA: Much calmer; much calmer after that, yes.

SO: Were you still president of the Association of Women Lawyers by this point?

NFA: No, I gave up; I resigned from all my positions when I left for London. My position was taken over by somebody else. It would not have been fair – I could not run an organisation from how many thousand miles away.

SO: No. At the Malaysia CHOGM, Dr Mahathir had been appointed as chairman of the High Level Appraisal Group, which was tasked to look at the Secretariat and the Commonwealth. And, of course, Malaysia was heading into elections in 1990. Apparently Dr Mahathir had invited election observers. You didn't come with that particular group?

NFA: No, because basically it was a PAD show.

SO: I know that Neville Linton and Sir Anthony Siaguru were involved. They were the Commonwealth Secretariat deputation. Were you in any way aware of how that played out?

NFA: Only from what they told me. I can't remember what was in the report – what conclusion they came to – but I think they said it was 'free but not fair'...

SO: Yes, that was Patsy Robertson's line.

NFA: 'Free but not fair'. *[Laughter]*

SO: And I know that that caused enormous offence at the top of Dr Mahathir's party.

NFA: Well, it was true! *[Laughter]*

SO: Yes. There was, shall we say, a certain view of whether the Commonwealth observers should have complete licence to meet whomever they chose, rather than whom the government designated that they might.

NFA: Yes, exactly. Well, at least, you know, ComSec showed its independence. Good for them. *[Laughter]*

SO: So, in the early 1990s, accelerating your work on women and development, you also attended the Harare CHOGM in 1991.

NFA: Yes, I did. I can't remember, because I have lost all my papers – you see, I've moved so many times. I became ambassador to The Hague for seven and a half years, Sue, so all my papers are in disarray. I can't remember whether governments had to make a report on women's issues or not, whether it was part of the agenda. They probably did, you know.

SO: But you were there in Harare, so did you meet Mandela when he was there?

NFA: Yes, yes.

SO: That was after his release.

NFA: Yes, I met Mandela. I remember Moses Anafu organised for him to give a talk. This was a side-line thing – I mean, it was on the side. It was a 'sideshow', basically.

SO: Was he, shall we say, the 'political star' of that particular CHOGM?

NFA: Of course. Everybody wanted to meet Mandela. Yes, because I remember... My God, when they showed television pictures when he was released... Overwhelming emotion.

SO: I spoke to Flora MacDonald, who had been Canadian foreign minister in the late 1970s and who, in 1991, had been responsible for a Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative report prompted by the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa [the MacDonald Group]. She said that she had been swept up in that ecstatic crowd and had ended up on stage!

NFA: Oh, okay!

SO: Yes, she got separated from her South African colleagues and ended up cheering for Mandela actually *on* the stage when he was speaking.

NFA: It was so incredible. But for some reason or other, he and Mahathir hit it off. They were very good friends, because Malaysia was one of the first countries Mandela visited. Even later, when he became President of South Africa and he had already divorced Winnie, he came to visit. He was with Graça, not married at that time, [and] I remember it was a nightmare for the Muslim majority in Malaysia – to receive this kind of couple, an unmarried couple! [Laughter]

SO: Well, I can understand the sensitivities of the protocol required.

NFA: That's right. At that time, I was already with the Foreign Ministry.

SO: Were you still on secondment from the Attorney General's office?

NFA: I transferred officially from the Attorney General's chambers to the Foreign Ministry in September 1996. But before that, they had formed this legal division in the Foreign Ministry, which was staffed by officers from the Attorney General's chambers. I was the first head of the legal division after I came back from ComSec in 1993.

SO: Before you left the Secretariat, were you involved in any way with the Secretariat's work down in South Africa after the Harare CHOGM?

NFA: No, not really. As I said, it was so compartmentalised. I mean, we were not involved in the work of other divisions. The only thing was that they had to give a report to us. We did a series of training for all the divisions in the secretariat on how they should mainstream gender issues into their own work, and then they had to produce these annual reports. But when it came to the actual work, they did not consult us.

SO: How difficult was it to defend your unit's work once Chief Emeka had become Secretary General? He was, of course, elected at the Kuala Lumpur CHOGM.

NFA: Yes, and he was very grateful to the Malaysian government.

SO: Indeed, for how the vote for SG was handled.

NFA: Yes, that's right. Because all of a sudden, Ramphal decided to stay on. That was a rumour. Then I remember Benazir Bhutto came, and Moni was very, very pally with the Gandhi family, because he was a personal assistant to

Indira Gandhi. So, they were all hoping that Rajiv Gandhi would come, and then the last minute he couldn't make it. They wanted Rajiv Gandhi to pass a resolution to ask Ramphal to stay on.

SO: So, this was all part of the politics behind the scenes?

NFA: Yes.

SO: Very interesting. Dr Mahathir, in his memoirs, talks about Malcolm Fraser's bid. Fraser had been going around the Commonwealth trying to drum up support for his candidacy, and he had the support of Bob Hawke, his Prime Minister. Chief Emeka had done his lobbying among the Africans. According to Mahathir, he deliberately tried to deal quietly with the choice of SG right at the start of the meeting, and he didn't even tell his wife what the division of votes was.

NFA: Yes, that's right. He engineered it, basically.

SO: Okay. But there was also this going on.

NFA: Yeah, that was what we heard. That's what we heard.

SO: No smoke without a fire...

NFA: Yes. But for some reason, Rajiv Gandhi couldn't make it at the last minute.

SO: Thinking about the personal politics at play, do you have any recollection of the Harare CHOGM in 1991 and the dynamics between Robert Mugabe and Nelson Mandela? This meeting was one of Robert Mugabe's high points. It saw the institution of the Harare Declaration, which had been in draft beforehand, and he was, after all, the premier liberation leader who had been head of government for eleven years.

NFA: Well, they must have got his consent to invite Mandela for the CHOGM, but he did not play any official role. So, it was still Mugabe in the driver's seat: he was the chair; he was the host.

SO: Yes, indeed. So, after Harare and until the end of December 1992, did your work change in any way? Were you trying to defend the work of your division? I know Chief Emeka was looking at the work of the Secretariat and where and how to rationalise it...

NFA: Restructuring. No, but at that time, because of the support of governments like Canada, nobody in their right sense – no Secretary General, whether they liked it or not – would have dared to reduce our unit. The only problem was [that] after the restructuring, they joined us together with the Youth programme, and in a way that was basically downgrading WDP.

SO: Your successor was Eleni Stamiris?

NFA: Yes. She was officially a Canadian citizen. We had tremendous support from the Canadian Government, and of course, they were also one of the biggest

financiers of ComSec and CFTC. Don't forget, it was a Canadian who was the chair of CFTC: Bill Montgomery. And then again, Nick Hare after Bill.

SO: It was part of Chief Emeka's agenda to bring CFTC more under his control. It was in a pretty autonomous position in Marlborough House up to that point.

NFA: Yes, after getting rid of Moni, there were no threats to him any longer. But he had a very compliant DSG, Anthony Siaguru. Except for Nick Hare, I don't know what his relationship was...

SO: After you left the Secretariat at the end of 1992, you joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

NFA: I went straight in in February 1993. I came back, had a couple of weeks break, then I went straight to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – on secondment, to head the legal division which had just been created.

SO: Yes. Was there a Commonwealth dimension to your work in the division?

NFA: No, not really. The Commonwealth was under the Multilateral Affairs Division.

SO: So, thereafter, did your work as a diplomat for Malaysia take you back to Commonwealth responsibilities or Commonwealth countries?

NFA: No, not really, because my entire work at that time was focused on the two cases which we referred to the International Court of Justice – throughout, until the cases were completed. And they even sent me to The Hague because they needed a lawyer, because I had been appointed as co-agent to the ICJ for both cases. That is why I was sent as Ambassador to The Hague – basically, they wanted a lawyer-ambassador – and because I was part of the legal team. I would keep up with what was going on in ComSec through conversations with my colleagues in Multilateral Affairs, and also with Patsy Robertson and Cheryl Dorall and so on, but it was not part of my work.

SO: Were you back here for the XVI Commonwealth Games?

NFA: Yes, definitely.

SO: The amount of financial and political support the Malaysian government provided for the Games was quite remarkable.

NFA: That's right, yes. And they were marked, of course, by demonstrations, because they stupidly arrested Anwar Ibrahim just before the Commonwealth Games. We had this masked and armed special SWAT police who burst into his home. Oh my God, I tell you... It was terrible, the way they did it. He was still the Deputy Prime Minister!

SO: I remember following the international press reports.

NFA: They were masked in stockings and balaclavas. They burst into his home and took him away.

SO: That must have been deeply shocking.

NFA: It was shocking. But of course, we had a very compliant press as well. The press practised self-censorship, so they would not have reported it. Basically it was reported by the foreign press.

SO: I know that the government under Dr Mahathir was particularly sensitive to foreign criticism. The push of the Harare Declaration had been good governance, and that of course includes freedom of speech and also independence of the judiciary. In both cases, Malaysia didn't necessarily follow.

NFA: Yes, you're right. 1987, of course, was when they had the trial, the kangaroo court, when they got rid of the head of our judiciary, the Lord President – we used the same title as Scotland, instead of calling him the Chief Justice. Now they've reverted to Chief Justice, but before it was Lord President. And before that, Sue, we had one of the finest, most independent judiciaries in Asia.

SO: That's right. And the Supreme Court lost its right for judicial review. Legislation was then introduced stating that only Parliament, by passing legislation, would enable judicial review.

NFA: That's right. Yes, and they dismissed a few Supreme Court judges, all because one of the High Court judges had deregistered the United Malays National Organisation, UMNO, which is the main party in the ruling coalition and Mahathir's party. After that, they were supposed to have a nine member Supreme Court to sit on appeal. I think they sat, and then Mahathir impeached Salleh Abas and a few other judges. They had a judge from Singapore and they had a judge from Sri Lanka here to impeach Salleh Abas in Parliament. It was 'mayday', really – 'mayday' for justice in Malaysia.

SO: From what you're saying, this highlights the extent to which Malaysian politics and Malaysian political culture under Dr Mahathir was starting to be out of step with the good governance drive of the Commonwealth.

NFA: Yes, and that's why he *hated* the words 'human rights'.

SO: Because human rights were taken to mean political rights?

NFA: Yes. 'Human rights' and 'good governance' – he hated those words. They wanted the term 'good government' rather than 'good governance' in the Harare Declaration. Check the Harare Declaration wording to see whether they use 'good government' or 'good governance'... But he hated that.

SO: They use 'good government'.

NFA: Yes, because he has a big thing about the term 'good governance'. Mahathir was totally against it.

SO: For fear that it might be used against Malaysia?

NFA: Yes.

SO: So, was there concern in government circles here about the creation of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, whereby a country could find itself on the agenda or under the surveillance of a committee of Foreign Ministers again? I know that CMAG was designed to deal with military coups, but I wondered whether you knew of any disquiet among top officials or in the Foreign Ministry.

NFA: But was Mahathir the chair at that time?

SO: No, he was not the chair, because Stan Mudenge of Zimbabwe was chair from 1995 to 1997. But Malaysia had a representative on the CMAG until 2002 – this was Musa Hitam, rather than the Malaysian Foreign Minister.

NFA: Right. I can't remember... When did Mahathir resign?

SO: 2003.

NFA: Okay. I was in The Hague at that time.

SO: Mahathir tried to step down in 2002. It was at a very emotional UMNO meeting when he was persuaded to stay on for another year.

NFA: Well, it's amazing that he actually stepped down. [*Laughter*] It was amazing. I can't remember whether Lee Kuan Yew had already stepped down at that time.

SO: The trouble is with leaders who occupy that top position for extended lengths of time. I think there is an inherent process of thinking that there's still so much left to be done.

NFA: I think definitely. You know, he's still very active. He's still telling Najib what to do and what not to do.

SO: Mrs Thatcher, too, said she was going to be a backseat driver. John Major's style in retirement has been very different.

NFA: Yeah, but it was a coup against Thatcher, remember.

SO: I do remember. I can tell you that my father was the leader of the Conservative 'Praetorian Guard', as chairman of the 1922 Committee of Conservative backbenchers, so he had...

NFA: Really, your father was a Tory MP?

SO: Yes. He had to be one of those who went in to see her on that November day in 1990 to say she had lost the confidence of the party. Although he never admitted it to me himself, I believe he told her that she could still carry the party in the House of Commons, even though the majority in Cabinet did not. I used to tease him that, because it was Mrs Thatcher, rather than putting on a tin hat and a bayonet before 'going over the top', he'd have to phone her from a nuclear fallout shelter.

NFA: *[Laughter]* What was the issue at that time?

SO: There were, I think, three issues: the poll tax, her authoritarian style in Cabinet, and particularly Europe. She had lost five key Conservative Cabinet colleagues on Europe: Michael Heseltine, Leon Brittan, Nick Ridley, Nigel Lawson, and Geoffrey Howe.

NFA: Oh my God...The Foreign Secretary and also the Chancellor!

SO: The Chancellor, yes. So, her style was coming to alienate people, and Europe was starting to take a trajectory that she didn't approve. Even though she'd agreed the Single European Act in 1986, there was now the push for European federation – political and financial – led by Jacques Delors, and she did not agree with that. She was publicly resisting. Geoffrey Howe and Michael Heseltine, particularly, believed that this was counter-productive to British interests – that you should be in Europe and arguing to manage the problem...

NFA: Yeah. Was this a night of the long knives?

SO: It was, for the Prime Minister! After that first leadership vote, which she hadn't quite clinched, individual members of her cabinet said, "Prime Minister, I of course will support you, but I don't think you have the support of the rest of the cabinet." So, if you have 23 people telling you that... She paid the price of being too domineering in cabinet. It was John Biffen who said that she regarded herself as "a tigress surrounded by hamsters".

NFA: Yes, and the handbag, I remember. The coiffed hairdo and the handbag.

SO: The handbag! Her alternative information system.

NFA: But nobody had the guts to do to Mahathir what the British cabinet did to Thatcher. He was just so utterly dominant, you know. But not as bad as Lee Kuan Yew. With Kuan Yew, we were just quaking. Somebody from the Foreign Ministry told me that, before a cabinet meeting – and this is a piece of gossip – S Rajaratnam, who was the deputy prime minister, was smoking. Then Kuan Yew walked in unexpectedly, took his cigarette, and crushed it in his palm.

SO: Oh, goodness.

NFA: Can you imagine? They were terrified of him.

SO: Yes, I can imagine that. An enormous, politically dominant personality; intellectually brilliant, Cambridge style...

NFA: The only person he respected was his wife, and they were both double firsts from Cambridge.

SO: Yes. Going back to Dr Mahathir and his style of politics... What he was trying to achieve – in accelerating Malaysia's development, in pushing forward as a new industrialising country – was to drag a country out of

what he perceived to be its doldrums and to catapult it towards the G20, with his 2020 vision.

NFA: Yes, he had a vision.

SO: That was remarkable.

NFA: It was. I mean, the man was a visionary, never mind his methods. The problem with him is that the ends justified the means. That was his philosophy.

SO: From what you saw within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, how important to Malaysia was ASEAN?

NFA: ASEAN? That's our first [priority]. Then, at that time, it was the Non-Aligned Movement. I don't know what's happened to NAM.

SO: It's still going.

NFA: It's still going? Well, we were very active; we hosted the NAM conference.

SO: You did, in 2002. Mahathir was, of course, chairman.

NFA: Yeah. Then, in that order: ASEAN, NAM, the Commonwealth and then the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, I would say. The Commonwealth would be above OIC.

SO: I just wondered, because this is the era in which Islam became more of a political and social force. Was it identified as such? Or is this a misrepresentation?

NFA: Yes, but the problem with the OIC is [that] they can never get anything done or agree with anything. That was the problem. It was so frustrating. We would pay lip service and so on, and we still had the Langkawi dialogue group – which, I dare say, is a complete and utter waste of time, most people feel. We were spending so much money. Nobody listens to what they have to say.

SO: What about the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Fund? Millions of Ringgit was spent on that...

NFA: Yes, that's right. We still have it. It used to be under the Prime Minister's Department before – the Economic Planning Unit. Now we've transferred it to the Foreign Ministry, because it has to be a Foreign Ministry tool. It has to be a tool of foreign policy, like in most countries. But yes, it's still very active and is still going on. We still provide a lot of training, especially for the Third World – a lot of African countries and so on, especially in our Administrative College.

SO: But there are also, of course, Commonwealth scholarships. Malaysia has provided a number of scholarships...

NFA: Really?

SO: So I understand; I could be wrong.

NFA: Okay, because it's not under Foreign Ministry... It's probably under some other ministry, so I'm not that familiar with it.

SO: Right. So, how important would you say is the Commonwealth to the political elite – or to the political class – as well as the business class in Malaysia?

NFA: The Commonwealth... I would say that it has its place in Malaysia's foreign policy, and I think they'll still want to play an active role and a significant role in Commonwealth affairs. I think there's still this belief that we can do something because, whatever it is, geographically, the Commonwealth encompasses three-quarters of the globe.

SO: Two billion people.

NFA: Yes, and we believe that we can make a more significant impact than, say, [through] the UN.

SO: Okay, so it's a smaller environment, which enhances the platform and allows Malaysia to have a louder voice?

NFA: Yes.

SO: Okay. But would it be fair to say that very often the issues that have confronted the Commonwealth have tended to be, primarily, African developmental issues?

NFA: Yes, and especially under Anyaoku. It was very Africa-centric.

SO: Then, with the rise of the small states agenda, where does that leave Malaysia as a newly industrialising country in Southeast Asia? Development was certainly Sonny Ramphal's grand strategy, along with the battle against apartheid South Africa. But it has to be said that the Commonwealth in the 1990s was changing. The Commonwealth from 2000, under Don McKinnon as SG, very much emphasised trade and finance. So, I'm just wondering whether the Commonwealth still has a utility and can serve as a useful platform to Malaysia, or whether the Commonwealth's importance to Malaysia is in fact sliding further down the scale of priorities and national interest.

NFA: Yes, you're right. But the best people to give you an official view would be Foreign Ministry people.

SO: Yes, I see. Farida, from your point of view, how effective was the Commonwealth? Did it primarily take its tone, its agenda, its visibility, from the Secretary General? Or actually was the role of government leaders the essence of the Commonwealth, in your opinion?

NFA: Well, I think the role of the Secretary General is pivotal. If we have a weak Secretary General, the whole complexion changes. He has to promote... Even on the issue of Sri Lanka hosting, for example, he could have taken a more significant role.

SO: He could have been much more actively involved in guiding heads, rather than acting as a recipient of heads' opinion in this?

NFA: Yes, exactly. Because for heads, they've got so many things on their plate: there are so many issues and they are members of so many international organisations. So, if you don't guide them, if you don't steer them, then it's going to fall by the wayside. I mean, how on earth did they choose Sri Lanka as a CHOGM venue, for example? It caused so much flack.

SO: The public relations disaster was predictable and predicted. The discussion at the Port of Spain CHOGM in 2009 had been around rewarding Sri Lanka for the end of the civil war, and then the proposal for Sri Lanka to be host had been deferred. The Rajapaksa government wanted it immediately. So, as you say, the whole question of how it was handled – in the run up to Perth, at the Perth meeting, and thereafter – left a lot to be desired.

NFA: Yes, exactly. And so much flack...

SO: Yes. It caused an enormous amount of damage because, as far as the press was concerned, that was the only story in town. It completely eclipsed the other good work that was being done.

NFA: Yes, exactly. That was a real shame, you know. That was a real shame.

SO: Was it covered much here in Malaysia?

NFA: Well, only in the foreign pages – in the world pages, you know. Of course, Najib attended. Najib headed our delegation. But don't forget, we also have a large Sri Lankan diaspora here.

SO: Okay, so that's a political constituency that needs to be nurtured.

NFA: And the Tamil Sri Lankans... A lot of the support and the funding for the Tamil Tigers came from here.

SO: I didn't know that. People talk so much of the Tamil diaspora in Canada, particularly, and also in London.

NFA: This is very old. They came here because, you see, the British brought in the indentured labourers from India to work on the railway and to work on their plantations, especially rubber at that time. But the Tamil Sri Lankans at that time came as professionals. A lot of my very dear friends, their parents or their grandparents came from Sri Lanka. But [there is a] difference between them and the indentured labourers. As I say, they were doctors; they were lawyers. They were a very highly educated group, and they did very well here. A small but significant community and they all feel very passionately, you know. A lot of them were Tamil Tiger supporters – those who are politically active, anyway.

SO: Did the Malaysian government take a public stance on the Sri Lankan civil war?

NFA: No, we didn't, because our foreign policy has always been to mind our own business. That is one of the philosophies in ASEAN as well, which is bad... You know, not to interfere in your partner's or your fellow ASEANS' political affairs.

SO: Absolute sovereignty?

NFA: Yes.

SO: But the problem is that, with globalisation and the growing interconnectedness of the world – and also the doctrine of 'responsibility to protect' – absolute sovereignty has been eroded.

NFA: Exactly. But when it comes to others... No, we're quite happy to criticise, but not with the Commonwealth or ASEAN. *[Laughter]*

SO: *[Laughter]* Nobody likes other people criticising them. So, Farida, in your view, what about the future of the Commonwealth? You're a longstanding observer...

NFA: Yes, and also a very passionate one. I really believe in the Commonwealth, but the problem is [that] the members – especially the big members and the big funders – also have to believe in it. Britain is more Eurocentric now, and it's basically the Australians and New Zealanders and the Canadians...

SO: Well, the Harper government in Canada has just indicated its displeasure by saying that Canada is going to cut its funding for ComSec.

NFA: Because of Sri Lanka. That was really not a very wise thing to have done, which is a shame, because they're our biggest funders. No, are they the second biggest or biggest?

SO: It's the ABC countries that predominate. Before the Harper Government announced it would cut its financial support for ComSec, Australia, Britain and Canada contributed approximately 70% of the £16.1m funding in 2012/13.

NFA: Yes. But just look at the Secretariat: it's decimated...

SO: It's a shadow of the size it was in Sonny Ramphal's day, and the Secretariat is going through a crisis of morale at the moment.

NFA: Honestly, I don't know how much longer...

SO: Kamallesh Sharma is due to step down in 2016. So, already there is private canvassing behind the scenes about the criteria and the type of person who should be selected for SG. Should it go along regional lines, or should it go on a meritocratic basis? Should the candidate be a woman? Should they be from a small state? Should they be a senior diplomat, or an established leading politician? There's an awful lot riding on the next Malta CHOGM, that's for sure.

NFA: Yes. Let's see, who were the other SGs who were diplomats – were they politicians or diplomats? Well, McKinnon was...

SO: Let's see. Arnold Smith had been a top Canadian diplomat; Sonny Ramphal had been Attorney General and Foreign Minister for a while in Guyana – he was the quintessential politician. Chief Emeka had been a diplomat, an international civil servant, and briefly Foreign Minister of Nigeria.

NFA: And, of course, he was also in the ComSec. He was DSG.

SO: He had been in the Secretariat since January 1966, apart from that brief stint when he was Foreign Minister of Nigeria in 1983-84. Then Don McKinnon, who was a New Zealand politician and Foreign Minister. And now we have a diplomat. I think, personally, from listening to my other interviewees, the consensus is that it should be a politician and it should be somebody who has been a leader, in order to be able to talk to other heads on the same terms.

NFA: In fact they wanted, at one time, Musa Hitam. It would have been a shoo-in for him, had he wanted it, but he didn't want it. Yes, because this was 2003. His son had died in the collapse of this building. We had a condo which collapsed, and his son perished in that.

SO: What a dreadful tragedy.

NFA: And he just did not want to leave Malaysia. He was so devastated. It was his only son – he's got two daughters – and he was just completely devastated. So, he didn't want it.

SO: In 2003, I know that Dr Mahathir was supporting Farooq Sobhan from Bangladesh for the post of SG. Were you aware of this?

NFA: Yes, I was – very much. At that time, because Musa was no longer interested – and then even before Sharma – they were eyeing a former Malaysian Foreign Minister, Rais Yatim. And then, at the last minute, he decided he was not interested.

SO: When you say 'they were eyeing' him, who was 'they'?

NFA: ComSec – the Commonwealth.

SO: Because Malaysia had taken such a prominent part in Commonwealth affairs?

NFA: Well, especially because Musa was, of course, a very good candidate, and so was Rais Yatim. A very seasoned politician, and he also had two stints as a Foreign Minister. Then he decided he'd stay on because he was still very much involved in UMNO politics. He wanted to have a significant position in UMNO – one of the Vice-Presidencies. So, he said he was not prepared. Leaving Malaysia would have been the death knell to his political career.

SO: Were you involved, in any way, in contacting or supporting the candidacy for Farooq Sobhan, or was that the Prime Minister's Office?

NFA: No, that was also the Foreign Ministry. [Sobhan] was also the Bangladesh High Commissioner here, so we were very familiar with him; we had worked with him.

SO: What was the objection to McKinnon?

NFA: I think [that], as far as Mahathir was concerned, he was white. [Laughter]

SO: So this was 'European' Commonwealth?

NFA: Yes.

SO: By European Commonwealth, I mean 'developed' Commonwealth, which Dr Mahathir would not have regarded as appropriate for a developing Commonwealth.

NFA: Yeah. Mahathir had bees in his bonnet, you know. Honestly, even for ASEAN... When Australia wanted to observer [status], he made some very racist remarks, which was so embarrassing for us, the Foreign Ministry.

SO: I know that in early 1989, Bob Hawke came up with his idea of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation – an OECD for the Pacific Rim. Dr Mahathir was very unhappy about that, and he came up with the East Asia Economic Caucus.

NFA: Yes, the Caucus. But anyway, now we've got APEC and everyone's happy since the US has taken the lead role.

SO: How important has the US been in Malaysian foreign policy?

NFA: Now it's important again, but under Mahathir, no. Oh my God, he was a thorn in their side. He was a real thorn. He just wanted to be seen as a champion of the Third World. Well, some of his criticism – especially of the US position on the Israeli-Palestinian issue – was justifiable.

SO: What about his position on Bosnia?

NFA: He was very pro-Bosnia, yes. You should read Kamil Jaafar's book, *Growing Up With the Nation* [Marshall Cavendish International, 2013].

SO: I had a quote from a former Malaysian diplomat, Karminder Singh Dhillon, which I wanted to put to Dr Mahathir yesterday [[during his interview for this project](#)] but didn't. Mahathir was identified as "taking huge risks with his policies and relentlessly pursuing initiatives that were poorly understood by his Ministry of Foreign Affairs."

NFA: And what policies are they referring to?

SO: It was not identified.

NFA: Well, let's say some of his policies were very awkward for the Foreign Ministry to implement. But we had no choice. Privately, they may have disagreed with him, especially his virulent anti-US stance.

SO: What about his virulent criticism of Israel?

NFA: No, it was very popular here. We felt that so many of Israel's policies – the settlement policies and so on – were also... And [the criticisms] struck a chord, especially with the Muslims here.

SO: Yes. How much would you say that Malaysian foreign policy is shaped by the domestic environment?

NFA: Well, the domestic environment would have to play a significant role.

SO: How much of it is driven by the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs? In terms of longevity of service, and Malaysia having identifiable, constant interests...

NFA: Well, especially now, because after Mahathir it was Abdullah Badawi, and he was also previously our Foreign Minister. After Mahathir, the architects of foreign policy went back to the Foreign Ministry. But now, even with Najib, he works closely with the Foreign Ministry. It's not him going on a frolic on his own, formulating foreign policies with complete disregard for the Foreign Ministry and Foreign Minister.

SO: Going back to the Dr Mahathir era, though, foreign policy has been identified particularly – though not exclusively – as having been shaped in presentation and also in content by the Prime Minister's outlook.

NFA: Yes, yes. That is a very true statement – very true. He decided he wanted to be somebody on the international stage.

SO: And so the Commonwealth became one of the useful platforms for Malaysia to reach a particular set of African leaders for Malaysian trade and investment?

NFA: Yes, exactly. Because it was more global than, say, ASEAN.

SO: Yes. How far do you feel the Commonwealth itself has also changed from the early 1990s, when you were in ComSec?

NFA: At that time, we thought we played a very useful role. With SGs like Ramphal... He was such a visionary and such a good orator. He was highly respected by the heads of government. Emeka Anyaoku was also okay. I don't know about Don McKinnon, because I'd left by then. But then he was also responsible for the emasculation of the Secretariat, and it became worse under Sharma, especially with the CFTC. I think ISIS did a paper, looking at the material value of the ComSec to Malaysia, and we found that we benefitted far more than what we contributed in terms of dollars and cents. For example, for our new university – which is the National University, set up in Bangi – CFTC set up the entire medical unit, which is now one of the best in the country.

- SO: Yes, that was identified in today's paper. There was a ranking of Malaysian universities according to global strengths, and that was identified as a core one for medical research.**
- NFA: Yeah. CFTC did wonderful work.
- SO: And it was South/South, so a political dimension of developmental states helping other developing countries using the funds from the West or from the North. Yes, and it was seen as assistance, rather than tied aid.**
- NFA: Yes, exactly. But even in terms of political work, like our election observer groups, we did far better work than even the UN observer groups, because we used the resources optimally.
- SO: Were you involved in any of those?**
- NFA: No, I was not, but a lot of my friends were. You should also interview Zainah Anwar, because Zainah was with PAD and she was involved in some of the election observer groups. She was with PAD and now, of course, she's very famous with Sisters in Islam and the global Musawah movement, fighting for Muslim women's rights.
- SO: Yes, Cheryl mentioned her in particularly positive terms. So, as you say, the Commonwealth was a trailblazer on election monitoring, even though they had limited resources.**
- NFA: They were effective; they used their resources optimally. And they had very good people, Sue. They managed to attract very good people to PAD in those days. I don't know about now.
- SO: Where do you see the future of the Commonwealth going?**
- NFA: Well, the ComSec, for example, really needs to strengthen capacity. Otherwise, how can they support the Commonwealth effectively, if they've been so emasculated? We need a strong SG who's efficient and who understands what the Commonwealth is all about – a Commonwealth believer. And then we need governments like Canada and especially Australia, New Zealand. And Britain's not interested. Britain maybe needs to re-orientate. I think amongst the British public there's still a lot of very good sentiment regarding the Commonwealth.
- SO: Among a certain older generation, there is still a degree of mystification: "Isn't that the *British* Commonwealth?"**
- NFA: Yes. [*Laughter*] Especially amongst the anti-EU crowd.
- SO: Yes. Was there a similar residual attitude – that this is "still the British Commonwealth" – here in Malaysia? And when I say 'Britain', I mean a wider British world. Did that die slowly and hard?**

NFA: It was the British Commonwealth. But, well, we've never been anti-British, you know? We've never been anti-British, because – especially the older generation – they felt that if we have to be colonised, thank God it was the Brits who colonised us. It was a 'win win' situation in the sense that, okay, you wanted our rubber, you wanted our tin and so on, but you also gave back. You set up a very good administrative system, you set up a good education system, you set up a good judicial system and you set up the infrastructure: the railways, the roads, and so on.

SO: Yes, so there was a degree of development along with colonial political authoritarianism?

NFA: Of course, yes. And we built on it. But the basic infrastructure was already there.

SO: The Commonwealth has evolved from being a relatively small entity of intergovernmental heads. Now, the emphasis is very much more on the role of civil society and the role of NGOs. The structure of the international system and the dynamic of international politics has dramatically changed. So, the Commonwealth has to adapt, too.

NFA: Yes, but they do have professional organisations – spinoff organisations, like the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association – which are doing very well. In fact, two years ago, they were promoting the Rome Statute, for example – you know, accession, ratification of the Rome Statute, etc. – and they organised a seminar here which was bipartisan and which was supported by both the ruling party and the opposition, promoting Malaysia's accession to the Rome Statute.

I remember I was very actively involved. The president of the ICC was here and I was also a member of the panel. By that time, I was the Director General of the Research, Treaties and International Law department in the Foreign Ministry. As a result of that, the cabinet even decided to accede. Unfortunately, that was 2011, and I excitedly texted the president, and unfortunately, Sue – I mean this just by the way – that was the year we had the Langkawi Dialogue. One of the invitees was Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, for whom a warrant of arrest had been issued by the ICC! So, we said we will not deposit our Instrument of Accession yet, because it would have looked very awkward.

I mean, it would have been an act of bad faith on our part. So, we said, "Let it be over, let the Langkawi Dialogue be over, and let Omar al-Bashir go home, and then we'll deposit our Instrument of Accession." Then, unfortunately, I had to go to New York at that time, because I had to head our delegation to the Meetings of States Parties on the Law of the Sea. When I came back, I learned that – to my horror of horrors – our de facto Minister of Law, who was also a very ardent supporter of the Rome Statute – and, in fact, during the first review conference of the Rome Statute held in Kampala, I think, made a pledge that Malaysia would accede – had opened his big mouth and said, "Omar al-Bashir is not welcome in Malaysia." Because sometimes he's a bit of a maverick, you know. And the cabinet panicked. To appease Omar al-Bashir – who had decided not to come anyway for the Langkawi Dialogue – they sent the Foreign Minister to appease him. They sent a foreign minister to

Sudan, mindful of our vast oil concessions in Sudan, of PETRONAS. It's all geopolitics, isn't it?

SO: Yes, it is. Were you aware of the Commonwealth's contribution to the emergence of the Law of the Sea?

NFA: In the sense of papers, vocational papers, and so on? Yes. We did a lot of good stuff, especially the legal department. Also, there were a few things which they provided assistance on. They did papers on extradition and also on spouses – foreign spouses being able to work, expatriate spouses being able to work in host countries, especially diplomatic spouses. Then also, [work on] mutual legal assistance and, of course, human rights – they did a whole series of workshops for police forces and so on, in many, many Commonwealth countries. I remember, because Madhuri Bose and Max Gaylard – and the Canadian who was head of the Human Rights Unit at that time, who was Madhuri Bose's immediate boss – they did a lot of good work. We've done a lot of useful work here, you know, Sue, which is not necessarily recognised. The late Jeremy Pope and so on, they did marvellous work in the legal division. And Neroni Slade went on to become a judge of the ICC.

Before Don McKinnon decided to terminate their contracts and give them limited contracts, we had very good people in CFTC. They gave legal advice to governments on structural adjustment and so many important issues – legal issues, financial advice and so on. Bill Montgomery was a good head of CFTC, because he was so supportive of the Commonwealth. All of us at that time were real believers in the Commonwealth and what it was doing, even though we were dismissed – especially by the British media – as a one issue, single issue organisation, which was really [to do with] South Africa.

SO: So, do you think the Commonwealth and the Secretariat, then, need a fundamental reconfiguration for the 21st century?

NFA: We do, you know. We do. We need to see where our strengths are and focus on those. What are the issues where we can contribute most effectively?

SO: Farida, thank you very much indeed.

NFA: Well, I hope I've been able to be useful.

SO: This has been fascinating. Thank you again.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]