

**F**OR Anne and Philip, their wedding next month should be the happiest day of their lives.

Yet, amid the joy of marrying the person she loves, the bride-to-be is filled with a tinge of sadness as the big day approaches.

By a cruel twist of fate, the Penang-born lass has found herself "trapped" in what can only be described as the most painful of circumstances – a stateless limbo.

And Anne certainly does not want to be seen as marrying her British fiancé just to gain UK nationality.

"I want to fight for British citizenship on my own. That will be my best wedding present," said an emotionally-charged Anne.

The lovestruck lady is part of a group of an estimated 500 to 1,000 British Overseas Citizens (BOCs) in Britain who have renounced their Malaysian citizenships in order to apply for BOC passports.

These ex-Malaysian nationals are mostly from Penang and Malacca who acquired the BOC status by virtue of being born in the two former British colonies before 1983.

But they are now stuck in a quandary. Having given up their Malaysian passports, they have been told their BOC passports do not entitle them to full British citizenship.

In other words, they have no legal status in Britain. They can visit their families in Malaysia on 30-day tourist visas but with no guarantee of re-entering the UK using their BOC passports.

For instance, one BOC who returned to Penang on a social visit visa was turned away three times when he tried to re-enter Britain.

Being stateless, he was forced to spend the next two years flying between Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong and Korea, continuously renewing his visa for as short as 10 days. He finally married a Chinese girl and worked in China.

But he faces an uncertain future when his work permit expires. He may have to leave China or find himself stranded in an airport or border crossing due to the excessive number of passport stamps.

### Tragic consequences

The poignant tales of the two Penangites were recounted during a pow-wow of nearly 40 BOCs at London Chinatown's Rasa Sayang Restaurant jointly organised by London Citizens ([www.londoncitizens.org.uk](http://www.londoncitizens.org.uk)) and London's Chinese Information and Advice

# A STATELESS LIMBO

Many British Overseas Citizens have had their lives ruined by dodgy solicitors who misled them into giving up their Malaysian passports as a route to acquiring British citizenship.



**Uncertain future:** Yeo (wearing tie, facing group) together with Jameson (beside him) and other campaign organisers meeting the Malaysian BOCs in London. — Choi Tuck Wo

Centre (CIAC – [www.ciac.co.uk](http://www.ciac.co.uk)). The group planned to march to the Home Office as part of their Stateless Citizens campaign.

A member known as Dee said he arrived in the UK in 1998 and subsequently took three Masters' programmes at Lincoln University over the years.

After spending more than £80,000 (RM480,000), including his EPF money, life savings and borrowings from family members and relatives for his studies and living costs, he found that he could not work officially in Britain. "I never thought that acquiring my BOC passport would render me *de facto* stateless," said the Penangite.

Dee said he survived by doing part-time work as an architect but lost his job due to the economic downturn last year.

"We're worse off than Malaysian overstay-ers. At least, they still have their passports

even though their visas have expired," he lamented.

Indeed, many BOCs have had their lives ruined by dodgy solicitors who misled them into giving up their Malaysian passports as a route to acquiring British citizenship.

Their BOC passports were found to be little more than "worthless pieces of documents" that do not entitle them to Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) in the UK or British nationality.

### Compassionate grounds

In fact, Malaysia (which does not recognise dual nationality) considers them as British citizens since their BOC passports are issued by Britain.

Of course, the British Home Office's seemingly inconsistent immigration rules are largely to blame for this sorry episode.



After being given the impression that BOCs can obtain ILR, they suddenly found their applications rejected in late 2007. By then, many had given up their Malaysian passports and MyKad.

In what is seen as a test case, the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal recently dismissed the applications of 122 BOCs, one of the grounds being that they were not entitled to British citizenship.

London Citizens lead organiser Neil Jameson, however, believed the BOCs had the strongest case for amnesty because they have no citizenship at all.

"We're making an appeal to Home Secretary Alan Johnson to regularise them based on compassionate grounds," said Jameson, whose organisation is Britain's biggest civil society with 130 groups comprising churches, trade unions and local associations.

CIAC's Malaysian chairman Edmond Yeo echoed similar sentiments, drawing attention to a UK Border Agency senior officer's response to his question on the BOC status just four days ago.

According to him, the agency's director for simplification projects Peter Wrench had accepted that "there is a fringe British citizenship issue and that a way has to be found."

"As far as I am concerned, it's not like it is a closed-door thing. We will continue to lobby them," Yeo said in reference to his question that was posed at a seminar on the migrant workforce and the UK economy on Wednesday.

Whatever the outcome, the BOCs are in a bind and probably going through one of the most traumatic experiences of their lives.

LEADERS of most of the world's nations and peoples met in Sharm-el-Sheik, Egypt, during the week to discuss doing what they had not been able to do on their own.

The theme of this 15th summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was "peace for development", signifying the two diplomatic pillars of summit host and incoming NAM chair, Egypt.

That the summit went smoothly despite differences between members is often overlooked. The sometimes testy relations between India and Pakistan, and Egypt and Iran, were minimised with the summit backdrop as *de facto* arbiter.

The five principles at the heart of NAM are mutual respect over territorial integrity and national sovereignty, non-aggression, non-intervention in domestic affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence.

Since its modest founding in Belgrade in 1961, NAM's 118 members now comprise 53 countries in Africa, 38 in Asia, 26 in Latin America and the Caribbean, and one in Europe.

Although forged in the Cold War era, NAM stood for more than passive neutrality from the beginning. Co-founders like Indian premier Jawaharlal Nehru concurred that NAM should strive towards a more equitable world order, being averse to the vestiges of colonialism and the temptations of neo-colonialism.

In being nearly synonymous with the developing world, NAM had to address the vast outstanding problems of global economic inequalities. There are also various issues of concern within member nations, but those could not be a pretext for neglecting problems at the international level.

## Aiming beyond neutrality



This is one area often overlooked by NAM's critics. The internal problems suffered by NAM members are caused or exacerbated by global inequities at least as much as they are distracted by them.

And where the movement has lost momentum in recent years, it is not solely because of the Cold War's demise. Domestic challenges, from obstacles to economic development and nation-building, to corruption and armed insurgencies, have also taken their toll.

Yet at every instance, the continued need for the movement remains – and remains evident. Even before Egypt had settled into its new chairmanship role at Sharm-el-Sheik, there was already Western media questioning of Iran's "suitability" in chairing the movement from 2012.

There was similar questioning of Cuba's credentials when it took over NAM's leadership three years ago, but Cuban chairmanship saw no problems. The continued carping and snide remarks from Western quarters about certain members' aptitude to lead the movement only confirm the continued need for non-alignment.

Cynicism about the movement often cites

the great diversities within NAM. But diversity need not mean irreconcilable differences; where members can build consensus on specific issues, their diversity becomes a strength through a great unity of purpose.

And that may be the real problem as perceived by the privileged status quo of a Western-dominated world. Among the chief demands at NAM's 15th summit was the call for a new and more equitable economic order expressed by Cuba and endorsed by Egypt.

This echoed the 1970s-80s call for a New International Economic Order that unnerved affluent power brokers in the West. The rallying cry this time is buoyed by the current financial meltdown centred in the West, which should perhaps be more concerned about its own errant financial dealings than the demands of the underprivileged.

Politically, if NAM had been "relevant" during the bipolar Cold War, it should be even more pertinent now in a unipolar era when the temptation to trade sovereignty for subservience is as strong as ever. Without bipolarity as guidepost, even the benchmarks of slipping into a new servility in a very unequal world are blurred.

We may be lurching towards a new multipolarity, but the long journey there is full of stops, starts, frequent disruptions and likely detours. No country should have to choose between Europe and Russia, or between the United States and China.

This is where economically and politically

disadvantaged countries need the steady guidance of non-alignment, particularly when issues of national sovereignty are at stake. Among other things, NAM is also about building an international consensus against destabilising global partisanship, schisms and factionalism whether or not they lead to invasion and war.

The principles and values embodied in the movement have already proven their influence and durability. NAM's five founding principles had been adopted from India's Panchsheel and China's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, reflecting those of the 1955 Bandung Conference.

These principles later determined those of Asean at its founding conference in 1967. Although the universalist principles referred to those of the United Nations, NAM brought them into sharper focus around the world than any other organisation had managed to do.

Ironically, NAM cannot soon forget the world's sole superpower and its continuing impact: like the UN secretariat, the movement's coordinating bureau is in New York. There is another, less savoury aspect to that connection during the week's summit.

As NAM leaders spoke at length about how the world's poor were suffering disproportionately from a crisis manufactured on Wall Street, US media headlines ran: "Citigroup, Bank of America post strong results," "Goldman Sachs profit tops expectations," and "JP Morgan's 2nd quarter profits jump 36%."