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Keep harsh penalties for drug offences

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I **AM** from South Africa and have over the last four months visited Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. In Malaysia I have travelled to Langkawi, Penang, Malacca and Kuala Lumpur.

Often the success of a visit to a city or country is determined by the attitude, conduct and friendliness of its citizens and not so much the sights.

Malaysia has by far been the most welcoming and friendly country I have visited on my journey. In Penang a young man showed me all the historical sites after I met him on the streets; in Malacca, a woman took time out to guide me through the eating spots and show me the town; in Kuala Lumpur at the train station where I was a bit lost, a young man showed me the way to the main station and helped me to the Monorail.

Apart from this, I have been helped when looking at a map, shown directions whenever I have asked for them and also been greeted at every turn.

Malaysia is mostly free of the horrors of drugs that infect other societies and seeing the parents and children at this festival prompted me to write about this.

In South Africa, our communities are in the grip of a terrible drug menace that is devastating families. In some poorer areas, one in every four households is affected by this scourge. Thousands of children are dragged into this and the rampant crime and violence that has multiplied due to this is a national disaster.

Gangs control large areas and young girls are sucked into prostitution. I have spoken to fathers who have seen their families fall apart and have lost everything through the drug trade.

Drugs cascade into South Africa as there is more money there than many other places in southern Africa.

There has been some opposition from western countries to harsh penalties with convictions for drug trafficking. Ignore these. If you reduce penalties, slack off your vigilance, turn a blind eye, allow corruption to let things slip, it is at your own peril.

The danger to your society is so grave that I wish you could hear from a friend of mine, whose young niece with a baby, is sleeping on the streets in the grip of drugs.

Once drugs get a small grip in a society, they do not let up.

You have a wonderful society in Malaysia, protect it at all costs.

Mark Durrheim

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