

Is an apology so hard to make?

Thengo Maloya, Malawi ambassador in Taipei, had more than enough reason to be indignant the other day. He was forced to take off his jacket during a security check before attending an Asian Democracy and Human Rights awards ceremony, although he had told guards of his diplomatic status. Because President Chen Shui-bian would attend the ceremony, guards had to tighten security requiring all guests to undergo checkups.

President Chen's security guards probably did not know that all diplomats enjoy personal inviolability. A state which accepts the establishment of a foreign diplomatic mission is bound to ensure the complete protection of all members of that mission and their families against physical violence, whatever its source, and from attacks on their dignity and freedom. By compelling Ambassador Maloya to doff his jacket, the guards: encroached on his dignity and freedom.

The National Security Bureau that provides security service for the president issued a statement in which it apologized to the Malawi ambassador. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Maloya had accepted the apology. But that is not enough. President Chen has to personally apologize to Maloya, or at the very least have his foreign minister do so in person for failing to ensure complete protection against an attack on the ambassador's dignity and freedom.

Or does the president, who described the security check as merely "excessive," think the kingdom of Malawi is a mini-state in dark Africa, not even on a par with Singapore which his former foreign minister Chen Tang Sun said was just as small as a piece of nose-dirt and therefore no personal apology is necessary? If it had been the representative from Singapore who was humiliated at the hands of his security guards, President Chen could simply care less. A Singaporean representative in Taipei is not a diplomat, at least officially.

But the chances are that President Chen himself does not know what a diplomat's personal inviolability is. He may be a consummate defense lawyer but he does not even understand common Western etiquette. If he did, he wouldn't have propped up before Mrs. Laura Bush to grasp her hand for a handshake at an inaugural ceremony for the Costa Rican president at San Jose last year. Chen did not know he had to be properly introduced to the first lady and wait for her to extend a hand to be shaken. A man who doesn't know Western etiquette certainly doesn't know diplomatic immunity and privileges.

No one has heard President Chen offer an apology to Mrs. Bush. He is unlikely to apologize to Ambassador Maloya. Is it so hard for the proud president to attempt an apology?

Threatening letters

All are agreed that President Chen Shui-bian is a very resourceful newsmaker: In the campaign of 2008, in which he himself isn't running, he has never failed to make up something to court wide—if controversial—publicity at the expense of those candidates he is helping to get elected. After demonizing Chiang Kai-shek and renaming the memorial dedicated to the generalissimo, Chen is now publicizing that his and his family's safety are under threat. Chen first said his dentist daughter received a threatening letter. Chen Hsing-yu, the first daughter, left Taipei for the United States with her son for "a visit," which opposition lawmakers ridiculed as her no-confidence vote on the National Security Bureau that provides security service for the first family.

The president followed it up by revealing his son, Chen Chih-chung, also received a threatening letter. Then he went on the record by saying he himself got an e-mail letter which threatened himself and his family with violence. His public affairs chief showed the letter, signed by a "Killer in Black," who threatened to send him "two bullets" if he does not apologize for demonizing Generalissimo Chiang, who ruled Taiwan from 1949 to 1975 as president. Two homemade bullets were fired by a gunman in Tainan on March 19, 2004. One of them grazed Chen's abdomen and the other was lodged in the knee of his vice president, Annette Lu. Both of them were aboard the same open car on the eve of the presidential election; when the shooting took place. The incident was rumored as an assassination attempt orchestrated by China, and Chen won reelection by a paper-thin margin of 0.2 percent, thanks chiefly to tens of thousands of sympathy votes. The gunman, a trained diver, committed suicide ten days after the shooting out of remorse by drowning himself in a Tainan canal, according to police, who couldn't find the smoking gun.

It's not unusual that a president—and for that matter, a politician or a celebrity—receives letters of intimidation. But it's unusual for the president to publicize why and how his life is threatened. Usually, an aide will just throw all such letters into a wastebasket without even showing them to the boss. If the letters are very specific about what violence is threatened, the aide may ask for a thorough investigation to locate their sender or senders.

That's why opposition lawmakers are claiming that President Chen is paving the way for declaring martial law or issuing emergency decrees to cope with a national crisis he can precipitate under the pretext that the life of the head of state is under clear and immediate threat. If martial law were declared, Chen could call off the presidential election and continue to govern the country by decrees.