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No regrets spending last four years 'in prison'

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IN early February 1994, Federal Criminal Investigation Department director Datuk Zaman Khan was the man in the news.

The crime-buster, who had put many hardcore criminals behind bars, was tipped to take over the Prisons Department to weed out corruption and crime thriving behind the cells, and restore public confidence in the penal system.

While many would have grabbed such an appointment, made by no less than Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is also Home Minister, as another feather to the cap, Zaman wasn't exactly jumping with joy.

At about the same time, vicious rumours were being spun that Zaman had fallen out of favour with the police top brass and that he was to be put in "cold storage" at the Prisons Department.

But it wasn't the rumours or the fact that a move to the Prisons Department would inevitably cap his climb up the police hierarchy that left the man in despair and desolate.

"Yes, I was heartbroken and sad when I found out about the posting. But it had nothing to do with what people thought about my personal ambitions," Zaman said.

Rather, he wasn't ready to face the premature termination of his career as a police officer.

"Being a police officer was all that I had wanted to do, ever since I was appointed a cadet Assistant Superintendent in 1962.

"I am a policeman and having lived that life throughout my adulthood, I felt that prison was not a place for me. I felt then like a fish out of water here," said Zaman.

Speaking at his spacious office at the department's headquarters in Bukit Wira, Kajang, recently, his perspective changed after a meeting with Dr Mahathir.

Zaman, who will retire on Wednesday, recalled how Dr Mahathir made it clear to him on the importance of continuing the efforts put in by his predecessor during the meeting they had at the former's office in the Prime Minister's Department.

This was days prior to his transition as Prisons director-general on Feb 2, 1994.

"It was his way of handling the matter that made me agree to the appointment," said Zaman, without wanting to elaborate on the details of the discussion he had with Dr Mahathir.

Four years down the line, Zaman's mission as entrusted to him by the Prime Minister was accomplished. Taking over will be Prisons deputy director-general Omar Mohamed Dan.

With Omar at the helm, the Prisons Department is now back on its own feet, having been under the supervision and control of Zaman, and his predecessor, former Federal CID director Datuk Yassin Jaafar, who was seconded to the post in 1990.

Today, Zaman calls his office at the Prisons Department his second home. In fact, he quips that he has no regrets spending the last four years of his service behind the prison walls.

In many ways, he has come to terms with his stay at the prison. He calls his prison staff "my large family", and the prisoners, "my dependants".

When he assumed the post, the department was still undergoing a massive shake-up after a host of problems, including rampant prison breakouts,

hostage-taking incidents and dadah trafficking among warders.

While he was considered by many as a tough disciplinarian during his days with the police, he seemed to have mellowed with age.

"It was tough trying to adapt to the lifestyle here.

"Although I am a policeman, running a prison is Greek to me. Luckily, my men were very helpful and they accepted me despite my shortcomings," Zaman said.

One of the first things that he did after taking over the department was to visit the correctional facilities.

And it was at the Henry Gurney Boys' School in Teluk Emas, Malacca, that he came to realise that prison life was more than just being punished for one's crimes.

"When I saw the boys at the school, I told myself that some of them can be rehabilitated. And it dawned upon me that the responsibility was mine.

"It was a turning point for me in my career, and I have not looked back since," said Zaman.

That personal realisation brought changes in the prison rehabilitation system, not only in terms of programmes, but also the approach.

Zaman said although the popular belief was that criminals should be subjected to the harshest possible punishment, his view was that the best way of rehabilitating an inmate was to treat him as a human being.

"This is what I have been telling my men. Treat the inmates with respect and offer humane treatment, and they can be your most loyal prison occupants.

"This will also augur well for their rehabilitation process. Although we must be firm with them, we must never use force or disgrace them," said Zaman.

In the past three years, Zaman has had a relatively trouble-free administration of the prisons.

But he still regrets that he does not have enough time to address several lingering problems, which were already in existence even before he or Yassin were posted to the department.

He was referring to dadah trafficking and addiction in the prisons.

"Despite our continuous efforts to check this problem, there are still cases being reported. It is not as rampant as before, but it is still happening.

"I can safely say that only 0.2 per cent of the 23,000 inmates is involved.

"I have had this dream of wiping out this menace during my tenure, but probably, I am too idealistic," said Zaman.

Asked what he considered to be his most successful project during his term as Prisons chief, Zaman gave a modest answer.

"Success is subjective, and it is up to the public to judge me for my efforts."

When pressed further, Zaman said he was proud to be part of the team which had improved public confidence in the country's correctional institution.

"Yassin has done a good job in addressing the problems here. I was lucky because my men are committed in their job and this made things easier.

"Knowing that the department I am leaving now is in better shape than what it was four years ago, is enough to make me happy," said Zaman.

And as for his plans after retiring, he cracked a sly smile and said, in obvious reference to his rotund figure: "Maybe I will go on a diet."

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