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Future of nation lies in the heart of its people

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I FIRST visited Sarajevo, then under Yugoslavia, in 1983. A senior government official, the late Fatah Zakaria, from the Primary Industries Ministry, took me and several others to the city for a short day tour.

We spent most of the day in the old city, where craftsmen and artisans sold their handicraft to tourists cheaply.

We had lunch of thinly-sliced beef grilled over hot charcoal, with desserts of Turkish coffee and sweet pastries. It was a trip made more memorable by visiting the exact spot where Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sofia were shot and murdered, which triggered the First World War. Even then, bloodshed and violent conflict were part of Sarajevo's history.

Just before lunch, we visited the famous Bey Mosque, built in 1521, just a decade after the Portuguese took control of the Malacca Sultanate. The mosque area was locked and we could only peep through the iron railings.

Save for an old lady trying to read what we thought was the Quran, the mosque was quiet. No azan (call for prayers), no jemaah prayers (group prayers), no sounds of any Quran reading.

I visited Sarajevo again in 1996, as part of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit after the mindless genocide of the early 1990s. This visit was different as I saw a different Sarajevo, one that was bleeding from the killings of thousands of its inhabitants.

There was fear and tension everywhere. I stayed at the Holiday Inn, where many diplomats, members of the international media and United Nations personnel also stayed. The hotel bore evidence of the daily bombardment and shelling from Bosnian Serbs. Glass windows were shattered, bullet marks dot the walls and some windows only had plastic sheets as covers.

There was no heating and guests were advised to move about carefully.

Walking along the streets, I remember a young boy kicking an old football, a scene which was missing for years during the ethnic cleansing period.

I remember walking alongside a teacher who told me that taking a walk in the streets was a luxury the local population was deprived of for many years.

Even then, there were real fears of snipers lurking in some dark corner somewhere. Sarajevo is located in a valley and the town is divided by a small river - one side consists mainly of Bosnians and the other mainly of Serbs. Most of the Serbs were located on high ground, along the slopes of the hills surrounding the city.

I visited the old mosque again, but this time the scene was somewhat different. The gates were open and some old men were cleaning the compound.

Dr Mahathir stopped by at the mosque and conferred with the old people. The old city, with the mosque as its centre, was going through a change. A few people were praying while some young men were hanging around, as if waiting for some direction or guidance.

Some shops selling handicrafts were opened. When I introduced myself as a Malaysian, the shopkeepers shook my hand and gave me small souvenir items like T-shirts and key chains.

Malaysia's strong position supporting the people of Bosnia Herzegovina has not gone unnoticed. Malaysia sells, particularly through its strong

humanitarian actions.

Not far from the Holiday Inn was a technical school which had been destroyed. Graveyards were everywhere and even stadiums were converted to become cemeteries. The airport was heavily guarded by UN forces, including those from Malaysia.

The 1996 visit saw hopes returning to the Bosnians and there were laughter again in the streets.

As luck would have it, I was in Sarajevo again last week. It was a four-day trip, one that was an eye-opener for some people. The first thing I noticed was the airport, which was free of armed army personnel and heavy armouries.

Malaysians visiting Bosnia Herzegovina need no visa, a recognition I am sure was partly due to the close relationship between the two countries.

I stayed at the Holiday Inn again, which had undergone massive repairs. A pianist even entertained diners at its restaurant.

The technical school located a few metres away has been repaired and soon its students will hopefully continue the country's rebuilding process.

A taxi ride to the Bey mosque gave me an equally heart warming scene. Full restoration work was in progress. Several mosque officials were busy cleaning the courtyard. Later at night, I joined some 60 to 70 Bosnian Muslims for the Isyak prayers led by a junior imam.

Most gratifying was the fact that the majority of the jemaah (congregators) were young men, some in their teens.

I would imagine that there is hope and salvation for Bosnians, Serbs and Croats in the country if they can find the strength to rise above their deep-seated hatred for each other. Some two million mines are still scattered across Bosnia, and this symbolises the animosity they have against each other.

The fate and future of Bosnia Herzegovina lies in the heart of its citizens. No one else can change the future for them. Not many are optimistic of the country's future, but the situation can change if its people agree to change and make a difference.

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