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Caring Malaysians reach out

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IN a day's worth of news on politics, crime, violence and other human suffering, it is refreshing to read of a mother's heartfelt thanks to the public for making an operation for her hole-in-the-heart baby possible.

The New Straits Times has long provided its readers an avenue to express care and concern for the less fortunate.

By organising donation campaigns, whether for people in need of surgery or for victims of natural disasters in faraway places, such drives have highlighted the caring spirit of Malaysians.

This year, NST set up two major funds - one for the victims of the January earthquake in Gujerat, India; and the second for the restoration of Universiti Malaya's Dewan Tunku Canselor, which was destroyed in a fire on June 29.

The Gujerat Earthquake Fund was opened within days of the earthquake which occurred on Jan 26 - India's national day - in the north-west state of Gujerat.

The quake measured 7.9 on the Richter scale, killing over 16,000 and making 400,000 people homeless. These included 7,000 children who were made orphans in more than 300 villages.

The fund collected RM406,161.83.

Money was collected in novel ways, including the KL-Penang Charity Walk by NST's very own veteran charity walker R.V. Veera.

He and 15 others walked 400km from the NST's office in Bangsar to Penang's Waterfall Gardens, flagged off by Indian High Commissioner to Malaysia, Her Excellency Veena Sikri.

The tragedy drew support from all sectors; religious bodies, schools, universities, hotels and corporations, to name a few.

It was also a real-life illustration for students at SMK Perempuan Kapar, who, under their Moral teacher S. Ummadevi, learnt to translate concern into action by starting a fund-raising project. The students managed to collect RM1,020 in five days.

The NST was also in the thick of search-and-rescue action in Gandhidham and Bhuj, the quake's epicentre, to cover the Malaysian SMART team which assisted in the operation.

The Dewan Tunku Canselor Restoration Fund was launched on July 30, almost immediately after news broke of the pre-dawn fire the day before.

"This newspaper feels duty-bound to initiate efforts to rebuild an institution which many among us have come to appreciate and find inspiring," said NST group editor Datuk Ahmad A. Talib in an open letter published to launch the fund.

"We've launched other campaigns in the past, and this one is equally important. It is a compelling enough cause for us to be involved in," he added.

Opened by the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-haj on June 25, 1966, the hall was where over 80,000 UM graduates received their scrolls.

The fire destroyed about RM12.4 million worth of property. UM vice chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Anuar Zaini Mohd Zain said building was insured. He estimated the cost to rebuild the structure to be about RM13 million.

As at Aug 20, the fund has collected RM1,436,372.53. Of this, RM607,567.20 were received in cash while the rest have been pledged.

Contributions are still welcome.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was the first person to donate to the fund with a personal contribution of RM600.

A day after the fund was set up, RM15,429.47 was collected from the Group of Concerned UM Students and various members of parliament and Government officials.

National car distributor Edaran Otomobil Nasional Bhd became the first corporate sponsor, donating RM20,000.

A huge contribution of RM500,000 in a six-month pledge came from OdaSaja (M) Sdn Bhd, the supplier of computers for the Employees' Provident Fund scheme.

Umno Youth also forked out a sizeable chunk of RM40,025.20 while Puteri Umno donated RM10,000.

International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, herself a UM graduate, found a fun way to raise money.

She held an "auction" in which she spurred about 30 Barisan Nasional MPs and Senators. With funds from her own ministry, and with her dynamic personality, Rafidah managed to put RM20,010 in the hat in one afternoon.

The campaign rallied Malaysians from all walks of life around a common cause and a shared experience: many of them were UM students or had, in one way or another, a connection with the university, and cared that part of their heritage had now been destroyed.

Even students from other universities showed their solidarity by starting collections of their own.

Both Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Utara Malaysia launched campaigns among their respective campus communities.

In the private sector, besides big corporations, restaurant owners and entertainment outlet operators took out a portion of their revenue for the fund.

And while many of the donors' faces have been splashed almost daily in the NST, there were generous others who preferred anonymity.

One man quietly walked through the doors of the NST Johor Baru office to hand over a cheque of RM20,000, refusing to say anything about himself or the money.

But this year's most exciting and colourful fund-raising event by the NST this year was definitely the NST Million Ringgit Charity Duck Race 2001.

On July 15, 80,000 bright yellow rubber duckies bobbed down Sungai Gombak for a 1.5km race.

Their "adoption" by the public managed to raise RM800,000 for six charity organisations - Persatuan Kanak-kanak Terencat Akal Selangor dan Wilayah Persekutuan, Tabung Hati-ke-Hati Maybank, MAA-Medicare, Nanyang Foundation, Hospis Malaysia and Kiwanis Down Syndrome Foundation.

The event was also a chance for donors and their families to let their hair down and enjoy a fiesta with food, fames and entertainment.