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Grit and valour of our soldiers in Cambodia

Adrian David

A BOOK by a former commander of the Malaysian battalion serving as peacekeepers in Cambodia in 1992 recounts the dedication and inspiring courage of the men stationed there. ADRIAN DAVID writes.

THE sacrifices and experiences of Malaysian troops who served as peacekeepers under the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (Untac) have been compiled in a book by Brig-Jen (Rtd) Datuk Mohamad Arshad Mohamad Raji.

The retired general was inspired to write The Malaysian Experience in Cambodia not only to document his and the Malaysian battalion's (Malbatt) experience in Cambodia, but also to serve as his contribution to the Armed Forces and the nation.

"I took it as a challenge and duty to record our involvement in helping restore democracy and peace in Cambodia, especially during the tense general election," Mohamad Arshad, 61, recounted.

He said former Armed Forces Chief Jen (Rtd) Tan Sri Abdul Rahman Hamid, who was then Army chief, also encouraged him to pen the book.

In the book, he recounted the spartan lifestyle in the country, mingling with the local people and foreign troops, and the Khmer Rouge threat to Untac troops.

"In the end, we prevailed and lost only one of our soldiers, Kpl Magendran Rajangham, 34, not in action but to malaria."

Mohamad Arshad was a colonel when he led Malbatt I from March 15, 1992 to July 4, 1993 and was succeeded by Kol Mohd Zamri Ismail, who commanded Malbatt II from July 5, 1993 until Nov 4, 1993.

Malaysian troops, comprising 45 officers and 805 other ranks, were deployed to Battambang, Siem Reap, Banteay, Meanchey and Pursat provinces to assist in the repatriation of refugees and displaced people following civil war. Malbatt later was involved in the cantonment, disarmament and demobilisation of the four feuding Cambodian factions.

Mohamad Arshad said the whole Untac stint is firmly etched in his mind.

"I often relate my experiences to other soldiers, as peacekeeping duties are unique in that we act as good Samaritans to avert war between contending military factions instead of killing or maiming the enemy.

"Some of the lessons highlighted in the book might appear critical and may be treated with disdain by some. But my intentions are without malice and were written purely for what I strongly believe in."

In the book, he spoke about the trying times and stressful period in an uncertain environment.

"We were constantly under physical threat from warring factions, including some renegade militia forces. The officers and men stood up against all odds and showed no signs of morale decay that could have affected their well-being.

"I marvel at their spirit, courage and dedication.

"I am fortunate to have commanded such resourceful and hardened soldiers."

Mohamad Arshad retired as Chief of Staff at the Army Field Command Headquarters in 1998 and went into the frozen food business with his family.

A total of 3,000 copies of the book, printed at a total cost of RM45,000 and sponsored by Tenaga Nasional Berhad, have been published and distributed free to soldiers. The public may borrow a copy from libraries.

The 162-page book was launched by Deputy Defence Minister Datuk Shafie Apdal last month.

The book, Shafie said, could be a source of reference for the younger generation.

"Hopefully, the book will also encourage young people to serve," he said.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his foreword said the book provided important lessons. He said it was in keeping with the Armed Forces' desire to document Malaysian troop involvement in peacekeeping duties.

"Although it took Mohamad Arshad several years to complete the book, it does not in any way make his experience less important. On the contrary, the lessons highlighted and the various activities involving Malbatt will make interesting reading for those who are to embark on similar peacekeeping operations in future," said Dr Mahathir.

He added that the nation should be proud of its efforts to help restore peace in Cambodia.

Former Malaysian ambassador to Cambodia Datuk Deva Mohd Ridzam said the book came as no surprise to him as he had always thought of Mohamad Arshad as a "scholarly soldier".

"Untac, UN and his other civilian colleagues have never failed to describe Mohamad Arshad as a hands-on soldier with heart. He has always kept an eye on the big picture. He was a good commander in that he was able to draw together different interests and points of view to achieve results that were good for all," said Deva, adding that Mohamad Arshad was popular for his good humour and easy confidence in interacting with soldiers and civilian personnel.

He emphasised that Mohamad Arshad brought out the best in Malaysia's expertise in the "hearts and minds" campaign as well as in terms of the Malaysian sense of "fair play" in dealing with the armies of the four Khmer factions.

Since Malaysia's first involvement in UN peacekeeping missions in Congo in 1960, it has continued to support the UN in its mission to promote peace and harmony worldwide.

One commendable mission was in Somalia, where our troops played a key role in assisting allied forces to rescue trapped United States Rangers following an assault by armed men at the Bakara market in 1993.

A Malaysian soldier was killed and several others injured in the operation. The mission was subsequently portrayed in the Hollywood movie Black Hawk Down, which however failed to give due credit to Malaysia.

Such exemplary commitment led to Malaysians like Jen Datuk Aboo Samah Aboo Bakar being appointed commander of the multinational force in Somalia in 1994, and Lt-Jen Datuk Pahlawan Khairuddin Mat Yusof leading the UN peacekeeping force in Timor Leste from August 2003 until now.

To date, Malaysia has participated in 20 UN missions, including in the Balkans and Cambodia, involving 18,000 troops. At present, 66 officers and 11 other ranks are serving as UN observers in Western Sahara, Kosovo, Timor Leste, Sierra Leone, Congo, Eritrea/Ethopia and Liberia.