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Never-ending mission to tell Bosnian story from home

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THERE was a time when Bosnia-Herzegovina was on most lips around the country with Malaysians vying with one another to help the war-torn nation being ripped apart by genocide.

It was just after former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had taken the world to task for ignoring the plight of the Bosnian Muslims who were being killed at will by the Serbs.

Not a day went by without statements in the Malaysian media about the atrocities being inflicted on a defenceless community by more powerful and hegemonious forces bent on ethnic cleansing.

There was palpable sadness worldwide, more so in Muslim nations like Malaysia which had been at the forefront of the international effort to give the Bosnians the right to live honourably and with respect.

But the wellspring of sorrow appears to have dried up in Malaysia since, with displays of emotion and action few and far between save for efforts by the Government here and selected businessmen with an investment agenda.

It is this paradox that has befuddled Hajrudin Samun, the outgoing ambassador of Bosnia-Herzegovina to Malaysia, whose refreshing warmth and affability may lead some to think this man unusually strong for one whose homeland was almost decimated not too long ago.

The truth is, however, far from this: he is deeply disturbed by the sudden drop in interest for Bosnia-Herzegovina among the average Malaysian.

"I have travelled to many parts of Malaysia and one time, I asked people whom I met if they knew about Bosnia and many admitted that they only had a faint recollection of the name of the country," he says with resignation about how easily many the world over have forgotten his country.

"Although the Malaysian and Bosnian Governments are close, many Malaysians are completely unaware of contemporary Bosnia. We should know each other," he added in a recent interview at his embassy housed at a spacious colonial building bearing a JKR address along Jalan Bellamy somewhere behind Istana Negara.

His office, a treat to the eyes after the monotony of concrete structures in the city, is courtesy of the Malaysian Government and testimony of the close bilateral ties between both nations.

"In Bosnia, we feel a greater closeness to Malaysia than Malaysians have for Bosnia. It is more apparent there," he says adding that the Malaysian ambassador to Bosnia, Zakaria Sulong, was one of the most popular envoys ever there.

This is because of the Malaysian effort to reconstruct Bosnia with schools, mosques and roads being built to such an extent that "you can feel the fraternal ties in concrete ways as opposed to here where it is still at the emotional level".

As Somun, who leaves for home and retirement in March after two years here, continues on this train of thought, it becomes apparent that he is not in the least critical of Malaysian support or empathy for his people.

"I am thankful for all the physical and mortal support that Malaysians have given to the Bosnian cause over the years," he says to the quiet strains of music in the background.

Taking care to emphasise that this would be a chapter in Bosnian-Malaysia relations that would never be forgotten, he is particularly thankful to Dr Mahathir for alerting the world to what was happening in

the Balkan nation.

History will never forget the impassioned manner in which Dr Mahathir, and other Malaysian leaders, took the Bosnian dilemma to various international fora.

Somun's parting wish is for future Bosnian ambassadors to help translate these emotional links into concrete economic, cultural and social programmes for mutual benefit.

It is already in motion with many Bosnians here to attend courses at institutions of higher learning, he enthuses in his slightly-fractured but quaint English used effectively to stress points.

He also points to the 100-odd Bosnians at the International Islamic University who are attracting more Bosnians here due to their 'saleability' back home where they easily obtain well-paying jobs.

On the Bosnian community here, he said there were about 200 people here including the students and a small group Bosnian refugees who work here.

Such is their affinity to Malaysia that some 60 applied for and were granted permanent residence status last year.

"There are also a few cases of intermarriage with Malaysians," he says, adding that he would not be surprised if there were more in future.

Interestingly, there are around 20 Bosnian refugees in Sarawak who have Puan Sri Laila, wife of the Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Taib Mahmud, to thank for a livelihood.

It appears that when Taib and Laila were studying in Australia and eventually decided to marry, it was a Bosnian imam who performed the ceremony "and I was told that their connection with Bosnia started with that".

Somun, ever aware of Malaysia's role in giving his people a new lease on life, has been busy putting his passion for the nation and its leaders into print with his book entitled Mahathir: The Secret of the Malaysia Success.

A best-seller locally and in Bosnia after its launch late last year, it is but one of several of the journalist-turned-diplomats literary efforts.

He also took time off his diplomatic duties here, an arguable point really as Samun's official and private lives have obviously coalesced into one - he co-authored a book on Bosnia with Tan Sri Lim Kok Wing.

The avuncular Somun is in his element when explaining why he embarked on the project with Lim, who had come out with a book of his own back in 1995 when the Bosnian struggle was at its height.

"The book - Bosnia - with its cover in black and red, was a narration of the sad events of the day. But I needed to tell the world that things are changing in Bosnia today with the nation getting back into normal life," he adds.

The cover of the latest book (Bosnia Today) is in pleasing green and blue depicting a waterfall, inspired by Samun's vision of a developed and prosperous Bosnia in the near future.

The other efforts of the former Yugoslavian Tanjug news agency correspondent in Baghdad are Jordan, The Roots of the Iranian Revolution and Beirut in Poetry.

Somun is, however, unhappy over the almost non-existent bilateral trade.

"Trade is maybe the weakest link between us because of the interruption in the Bosnian production system caused by the problem between the Serbs and Bosnian Muslims between 1992 and 1995.

"There have been some attempts to sell fruit juices here. But not many other things are sold here. I am very unhappy with this."

He is proud of the food industry in Bosnia which he feels can supply Malaysia which currently buys dried fruit and juices from other European nations.

In terms of Malaysian investment in Bosnia, he says Bosmal, a Bosnian Malaysia company, is building the tallest twin-buildings in Sarajevo.

The business-residential complex, the tallest at 40-storeys in South-East Europe and costing an estimated RM190 million, should be completed by the middle of this year.

"It will be symbolic of Malaysia in Bosnia. It will represent Malaysia in my country."

Bumi Highway, he says, is another Malaysian company with projects in Bosnia.

"They have been there making very complicated preparatory work for a resort similar at the mouth of a river at the southern end of Sarajevo. It is a very complicated project to be completed over the next 10 years."

Somun says a large Bosnian company with expertise in installation of transmission lines may be obtaining a project in Malaysia soon.

On culture, he says the Al Bukhary Foundation had agreed to host an exhibition on the Islamic heritage of Bosnia at the Islamic Arts museum in Kuala Lumpur in 2005.

It is clear that Somun has had enough of the life of a diplomat after 25 years on the road.

After the travel and excitement at the forefront of diplomacy, he yearns for the simple pleasures of family, friends and home.

"I am home-sick much more now. I need to be with my family, relatives and friends as I want to enjoy time with them," says the 66-year-old in the frank, honest and jovial manner that has won him numerous friends in Kuala Lumpur.

"The days are passing very quickly and I want to return as soon as possibly to Bosnia although I love Malaysia and the people very much," he says, adding philosophically that he was at an age "where I have little life left to enjoy".

Of course, being the journalist that he is, Somun will continue writing for magazines and journals.

"I have already started writing a few articles and am waiting to put my hand to pen again," says the man who started his journalistic career as a diplomatic reporter with the Oslobodjenje newspaper in Sarajevo.

Come what may, it appears that Somun will continue on his neverending mission to tell Bosnia's story.