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Focus on poverty removal

By Manja Ismail

WHEN I first visited Pakistan in 1993 as a journalist covering then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's official visit, we took the opportunity to visit the rugged, adventure-beckoning Khyber Pass bordering war-ravaged Afghanistan.

Travelling through rugged terrain and rock-strewn unpaved mountain roads in the foothills of the Hindu Kush, we were greeted all along the way by waving gun-toting Pathans.

Our delegation included the then Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

We noticed that the people of that region, the majority of them Pathans, were, despite their fierce pride, very poor.

They welcomed us with open hearts, as Pathans are wont to do, and shared with us the meagre food they had.

Last week, I had the opportunity to re-visit Pakistan, this time, with Abdullah heading the delegation as Prime Minister.

Not much has changed in the capital, Islamabad. Although we did not go to the magical Northwest Frontier and the Khyber Pass, we were told that it is as it has been for centuries - still rugged, still undeveloped and the people, still poor.

The welcome was just as warm but save for an administration that has changed several times and some new roads and a five-star hotel, it remains the same. Poverty still rules.

Islamabad's twin city, Rawalpindi, is still congested and even more over-populated.

Motor rickshaws, bullock carts, taxis, dilapidated buses filled to the brim with passengers, rubbish-strewn streets and beggars dominate the landscape.

In 1993, I was approached by one young shop assistant, asking me to sponsor him for employment in Malaysia. This time, there were many more, including graduates, seeking job opportunities, their resumes at the ready.

The job-seekers were encouraged by Abdullah's announcement that Malaysia was willing to accept Pakistani workers and after a prosperous Gulf nation, the employer of choice for Pakistanis before, shut its doors on foreign labour.

The majority of Pakistanis are like Muslims in most parts of the world. They are still categorised as living in poverty.

For as long as many of our generation can remember, Muslims have always been categorised as being among the poorer cousins in the community of nations.

It was only after 9/11 that they received another label from the West - terrorists.

Abdullah, who is also chairman of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, chose his visit to Pakistan, the neighbour of Afghanistan where it all started, to raise the issue which has pushed Muslims further and further away from the mainstream into poverty.

When he spoke at Islamabad's International Islamic University after receiving an honorary doctorate in law, Abdullah said the greatest challenge today for the Islamic world was how to lift themselves out of the shackles of poverty and restore their dignity and self-worth.

Abdullah spoke passionately and despairingly about how poor countries

were always looked down upon, manipulated by the big powers and subjected to divide-and-rule policies of the more powerful and richer countries.

But if they could get out of their present predicament and educate themselves, they would be respected and would have the means to bring changes for the better to the people.

It is no secret that backwardness and poverty dominate the Islamic world.

More than half the people in one third of the Muslim countries live below the poverty line, earning less than US\$2 (RM7.60) a day.

There are Islamic countries where 90 per cent of the population survive on that little money. Poverty not only contributes to their backwardness, it also exposes them to the ravages of disease and illiteracy, and, inevitably, terrorism offers an escape from the meaningless lives they lead.

Abdullah sought to re-focus the attention of Muslim countries on the real problem facing them - poverty, and not the terrorist label pinned on them.

The Prime Minister asked the richer Muslim countries to work together to solve the poverty problem, saying that there was no bigger issue which could retard the Muslim world and diminish its influence.

Abdullah's message to the Muslim world was that there was no more effective way of overcoming their problem than education to enable them to enhance knowledge and get on par with the rest of the world.

"Education has saved millions of people around the world. This has happened effectively in many countries which were once poor," he said.

"This has also happened in my country where we have almost wiped out the scourge of poverty."

Abdullah said there was no reason why Muslims could not regain the glory they enjoyed a thousand years ago when the Islamic world was the centre of learning, of philosophy, of science and medicine.

On our journey back, we stopped at Lahore where I visited historical sites which symbolised the greatness of Islamic civilisation and power.

These included the Lahore Fort built by Akbar the Great, the Badshahi Mosque built by Aurangzeb, and the Shalimar Gardens built by Shah Jehan, three of the most famous Moghul rulers of India.

The beauty and splendour of these monuments evoked in me awe at the greatness of Islamic architecture of that age. But without knowledge, without power, without influence, none of these monuments would have been built.

And as Abdullah said in Islamabad, these symbols of Islam's glory were not there by accident.

He is right. It was no accident that the golden age of Islam coincided with the period when the Islamic world was the centre of learning.

It is time the Islamic world takes note of this.

(END) Source : New Straits Times