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'Palestinian women a force to be reckoned with in the face of tragedy'

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Violent death and crimes against humanity continue to haunt the people of Palestine, but their women have become a force to be reckoned with in resisting occupation, a Palestinian doctor said today.

Dr Mustafa Salem, a medical director of the Jordan Hospital in Amman, said although many Palestinian women had lost their husbands to death or imprisonment, they were involved in ensuring life went on as usual in the war-torn country.

"They have come up with ingenious ways of earning income for their families, such as knitting or farming. They also cultivate whatever land they find near their homes," he said, adding that they had multiple roles of caring, educating and protecting their children.

He was speaking at an event to welcome and hear the experiences of Palestinians, organised by the National Council of Women's Organisations at the Women and Family Development Ministry here.

Fighting with his emotions, Dr Mustafa said the increasing hardships faced by Palestinians affected women and children the most.

They have to deal with Israeli occupation forces crippling and killing their men, deteriorating infrastructure and weapons such as "fertility-reducing poison gas and water pollution chemicals", he said.

"Mothers have turned to mediaeval ways to secure education for their children, as many of their schools have been bombed or (damaged). They find any building and volunteer to read to the children and teach the children to love their land," he said.

He said Malaysia was very lucky to have societies and organisations looking out for the rights of women and children, and congratulated them on their achievements.

Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, wife of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was present at the event, said Malaysia would continue to help Palestinians.

"There are suggestions that we can help them market their handicraft, which are beautiful. Marketing is a problem for them as they do not have the system to market their products," Dr Siti Hasmah said.

Malaysia could help them market their products through e-mail, she added, but a point of concern was whether proper communication lines could be established via the Internet.

She said currently scholarships and educational funding were administered by the Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI) in "adopt-a-student" programmes for Palestinians.

The event was attended by Women and Family Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, NCWO president Datuk Dr Sharifah Hapsah, Palestine Ministry of Education director-general Muntaha Nihad Jahar, and Palestine group administrator Noman Al Sharif.