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Making a difference

Ahirudin Attan

As a correspondent in London 10 years ago, I dined with some unforgettable warriors: the freedom fighters from Kashmir, the anti-junta activists from Myanmar, and the apartheid champions from South Africa. But the one I remember most was the lone English mercenary who went to Bosnia-Herzegovina to fight the Serbs.

The morning Mr Daud Rosser-Owen came to my office-apartment, knuckles white as his goatie from the cold, with green fatigue, beret and haversack, it was the winter of 1992 and snowing a little on Bayswater where the New Straits Times shared an office with Berita Harian. The bloody ethnic cleansing in the Balkans was raging like wildfire.

That winter alone, tens of thousands died in freezing temperatures in the hills of Sarajevo. The Serb snipers needed to do little. The US and Britain, victors at Desert Storm over a grossly overrated Iraq, did nothing.

Daud, mannerisms like Richard Dreyfuss, told me of his plans to sneak into Sarajevo from Zagreb in Croatia. Once in Bosnia-Herzegovina, he would establish links with the Muslim resistance. He was a war veteran and the least he could do once there, was to help the Bosnian children survive the winter.

The soldier was probably killed in Bosnia, as I later wrote in a despatch from London. I had still not heard of him or from him when it was time to end my stint at the end of summer 1993.

Why did he see me before he left? No, he did not come to me because I sympathised with the Bosnians but because I represented NST and NST represented Malaysia; and Malaysia's voice against the Serbs, small as it might have been, was urgent and sincere.

Earlier that year, at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Jakarta, as the world lay asleep to the events in the Balkans - even Europe failed to stir to the problems in its own backyard - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had launched a shocking salvo against the former Yugoslavia. In a matter of days, NAM had condemned the massacres by the Serbs, and Belgrade's membership in the movement was suspended.

I was in Jakarta to cover the NAM meeting for Business Times, together with hundreds of journalists from over 100 countries. Malaysia's single-mindedness to defend the Bosnians got the whole city rooting for Dr Mahathir.

I was told that when he was interviewed by an Indonesian TV station during the summit, the reporter received a directive from "high up" to conduct the interview in English so that the Malaysian PM would not reach the millions of Indon viewers who understood only Bahasa Indonesia and their local dialects.

In the months that followed the Jakarta summit, Malaysia would pursue its Bosnian agenda relentlessly at the United Nations, the OIC, the International Human Rights Conference in Vienna in the summer of 1993, until the US and Britain, and later Nato, pricked by conscience and pounded by a growing international outrage, put a stop to the Balkan war.

Between 1992 and 1995, hundreds of thousands of Bosnian men and boys had been killed and an unspecified number of their wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts and grandmothers raped and brutalised.

Next week, eight years after the end of the Balkan massacres and 11 years after the fiery Jakarta NAM summit, Malaysia begins hosting over

3,000 government officials, journalists and observers from more than 100 NAM member countries.

The world has changed greatly between Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. South-East Asia has survived a series of huge setbacks after the currency crisis of 1997, Labour has displaced Tories in the UK Government, the World Trade Center is gone, and the NST has closed its London office.

A junior Bush has replaced the senior Bush as president of the US while Saddam Hussain continues to beat about the bush in his dealings with the arms inspectors of the UN, the world body that will be remembered also for its initial betrayal of the Bosnian people.

Peace and prosperity still elude the people of Iraq and Kashmir. Radovan Karadzic, the Serbian leader indicted for war crimes, is still at large, and Israel continues to terrorise the Palestinians as Washington and London (and their wannabe, Canberra) join forces to hunt down Saddam, Bin Laden and other so-called Islamic militants.

NAM has survived even after the end of the Cold War - and despite many questioning its relevance today - because it has proved that it can be effective in dealing with events such as these.

For Malaysians who do not understand why the Government places such great importance on the summit, the reason is simple, at least the way I see it. It was NAM, in Jakarta 11 years ago, that got the world to listen to the cries of Bosnia. Not the UN, not Nato, not the EU, and certainly not the US or the UK.

As chairman of NAM for the next three years, Malaysia will not be able to stop all the malice and madness of the world. But if we can make a little difference, as Daud believed he could in Bosnia, won't the world be a little bit better a place to live in?