

Schoolgirl's escape from death

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HER family had given up hope of ever finding her alive when she disappeared for more than five days during the May 13 communal clashes in Kuala Lumpur.

Indeed, Uma Ramaswamy Iyer might have ended up dead had it not been for the kindness of two Malay men.

Uma, now 50, said she was a Form One student at Convent Bukit Nanas in 1969. Her family lived in Jalan Gurney, close to the epicentre of the clashes.

"Usually, a Malay friend and I would stay back in school and take a bus home together.

"That day, at around 5pm, we waited but no buses seemed to be on the road and it was unusually quiet.

"A Chinese man came running down the street and asked us what we were doing. I remember his words clearly. 'You better run, the Malays are killing the Chinese!'

"We were stumped. Even though we were close to tears, we started walking and managed to get out of Jalan Ampang. We decided to walk along the Klang river, to stay away from the main roads.

"We reached the Ahmad Safuan building at Kampung Baru, and as we were passing by, a Malay man inside a Securicor office shouted at us, asking us what we were doing on the streets. I told him we wanted to get to Jalan Gurney.

"He asked us not to proceed and got us into the building. I managed to call home to say I was stuck at Kampung Baru but before I could say anything else, the line went dead.

"From the building, we could see the shophouses - mostly run by Chinese on Campbell Street, parallel to where we were - up in smoke and we



could hear 'Melayu potong China' repeatedly. We could see many people running around with parang," she added.

Uma said there was a Chinese girl working in the Securicor office, and the armed men on the streets were calling for all the Chinese to be brought out.

"The Malay man who took us in told us it was not safe for us to remain there, and led us to the back.

"There was a six-foot wall which I couldn't climb but this man helped to push me and the others over the wall where we ended up at the Klang River bank.

"There were many people in groups along the river bank, trying to flee, and we joined them. Along the way, we could hear shouts and people screaming but we kept on walking.

"We went deep into the Malay heartland of Kampung Baru and took refuge at a mosque with the rest," she added.

Uma said while others managed to go home after a few days, she couldn't because her house was located in the centre of the clashes.

A "Haji" took care of her, bringing her food for five days at the mosque but when she got so homesick, she wouldn't eat, he risked his life by going out to look for a patrol car to send her home.

"My parents were shocked to see me alive after five days - they had presumed I was dead," she added.

She bumped into the "Haji" again five years later, and was surprised when it was he who remembered her first. However, she lost touch with him after that.

Uma, who is secretary to the Consumers Association of Penang president, said the only time she's experienced racial tension in Malaysia was during May 13.

"Till today, I still have friends from all races.

"And even if there is any tension between the races, it can be easily resolved if everyone does their bit not to provoke each other."