

Trouble brought neighbours closer

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FOR at least one neighbourhood, May 13 did the unpredictable: it inspired closer race relations and better neighbourliness.

Despite being in the middle of the route used by troublemakers from nearby villages, the residents of Laman Peel, Kuala Lumpur got through the difficult period without any untoward incident.

Still, K. Kanagendran, then 34, and his neighbours decided they should take steps to secure their neighbourhood and protect one another.

"We all signed a pledge to uphold peace and harmony, and to protect the various races living in the area," the former Petaling District Office chief clerk for administration said in an interview.

The pledge, dated May 15, 1969, read:

"We, the people of Laman Peel, Kuala Lumpur pledge to our government that we will carry on living as good neighbours among various races in our area. We will do all our best to support the government to keep peace and harmony among the various races. We promise not to let ourselves be influenced by outside elements."

It was signed by 46 residents of different races.

The pledge also incorporated measures that would be used to stop invaders from causing trouble in the area. It was the residents' own standard operating procedure which stated that all Chinese, Malays and Indians should come out and stop troublemakers of their own race from harming others in the neighbourhood.

Those with telephones had to call 999, while others were told to put on all their lights, blow whistles, beat empty tins and shout to wake their neighbours.

Kanagendran said a duty roster was drawn up with three shifts - between 11pm to 1am, 1am to 3am, and 3am to 5am. Families took turns to stay awake and keep watch.

"We were lucky to make it through that period without any problems. However, that was also a time when we all realised how important race relations were, and we learnt to appreciate each other more," said Kanagendran, now 72.

Oddly enough, he said the relationship among the races was quite cold prior to May 13, and that the riots actually brought people together.

"There was always some degree of suspicion about each other and the neighbours hardly spoke to

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now resides, in 1973.

"However, after the riots, we shared a better relationship with our neighbours and those of other races," he said.

Kanagendran said he called the local authorities to clean up an overgrown open area within the housing estate so that the children could play and mingle together, "to erase prejudices".

The residents got together to employ someone to maintain the field and the children did their part by picking up rubbish to keep the area clean.

"I would, of course, reward them with ice-cream," laughed Kanagendran.

The field became a symbol of unity for the neighbourhood and a reminder to all that race relations could not be taken for granted.

