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A tragic effect of Malaysia's generosity

AS this was written, a Royal Malaysian Air Force Hercules C-130H transport aircraft is flying back to Malaysia across the Indian Ocean with the body of Bernama TV cameraman Noramfaizul Mohd Nor, who was killed in Mogadishu, Somalia, on Friday.

Noramfaizul is the second civilian to join a list of Malaysians to have tragically lost their lives in Somalia over the last two decades.

Malaysia had lost five soldiers serving the United Nations Operations in Somalia (Unosom) between 1993 and 1994.

Cpl Mat Aznan Awang was mortally wounded in a military operation to rescue United States Army Hangers, made famous by the movie *Black Hawk Down*, in October 1993.

Whether by chance or design, the movie failed to depict the significant role that Malaysians played in the rescue mission, which also left nine other Malaysians injured.

In 1994, Staff Sgt Azman Mohamed Tahir, of the 21st Special Forces Group and Cpl Gani Binyol, of the 6th Royal Ranger Regiment, were killed in an ambush during a UN escort mission in Mogadishu.

Sgt Abdul Kadir Bakri and Cpl Azhear Shuib, of 22nd Commando, died in separate accidents while patrolling the devastated city.

In 1998, businessman Col (Rid) Rashid Musa was gunned down in South Mogadishu.

According to reports, Rashid was a partner in the Somali Telecommunication Service (STS), a joint venture between Malaysian and Somali businessmen.

Noramfaizul's death in the line of duty sums up the continued irony of sorts in the recent history of relations between Malaysia and Somalia, post Mohamed Siad Barre — the last president of the Somali Democratic Republic.

Barre's 22-year dictatorship collapse in 1991 led to the total disintegration of the country. Warring factions took control of the streets, plunging Somalia into civil war with no side having a clear advantage in wresting control and establishing a government.

Severe drought brought famine. Images of acute malnutrition, including one of a vulture perched next to a dying skeletal frame of a toddler, forced the world to take notice.

The UN passed a resolution paving the way for the creation of Unosom to establish a secure environment for humanitarian relief operations. That was in 1992.

Malaysia's foreign policy in championing the cause of the poor and oppressed saw the government commit troops under Unosom.

If Malaysia, a multiracial, multireligious, multicultural and multilingual country could live in peace and stability, surely there must be something that we can impart to the Somalis who are of one religion, one race, one language and one culture.

But June 1993 saw the massacre of 24 Pakistani peacekeepers at the hands of Somali rebels opposed to the UN.

The UN had been sucked into the Somali quagmire. In October the same year, 18 elite US troops died in a botched operation to nab warlords, leading to the rescue operation that saw the death of Mat Aznan.

For the Malaysian army, the Oct 3 battle of Bakara was probably the most intense it ever faced in its history.

Nothing prepared them for it. They came on



a peacekeeping mission, but ended up in a firefight with the people they were supposed to keep the peace with.

But such was the volatility in Somalia, and for the officers and men, mostly of the 19th Battalion Royal Malay Regiment (Mechanised), they could hold their heads up high.

By March 1994, US forces had withdrawn from Somalia and Malaysia had been handed the lead role in Unosom.

Gen Aboo Samah Aboo Bakar was appointed Unosom commander in January 1994, leading some 22,000 military and civilian police personnel. It was the epitome of Malaysia's success in UN military peacekeeping missions, a recognition of the professionalism of the army and the high-profile foreign policy of the country at that time.

Malaysia was entrusted with a bigger role — to establish a Somali civilian police force as well as to search for that ever-elusive peace.

The US pullout had eased tensions between the UN, under Malaysia's leadership, with Somali factions.

But it could not ease relations between the factions. Wrought by factionalism and clans, Somalis could not muster enough will to create a stable, independent government of its own despite multitudes of UN-brokered peace talks. It was clear that the UN was failing.

By November 1994, the UN completely withdrew from Somalia after losing 154 lives, including 149 military personnel, succumbing to reality that the volatility in the Horn of Africa nation had made it difficult for any semblance of peace to be achieved.

Malaysia could be proud of its achievements, but destiny was in the hands of the Somalis.

Malaysia continued to help. In January 2009, former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was invited to address the various factions that made up the Somali Parliament, including current President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, in Djibouti.

There seemed to have been relative peace following that meeting, but today, the Somali government, with the presence of African Union troops, barely clings on to power.

Hence, when images of famine again rallied calls for international aid, Malaysians found it their calling to respond accordingly, to do the right thing, as they had done previously.

This time, Noramfaizul paid with his life.

It remains unclear whether it was the Somalis or African Union soldiers that fired on the convoy, as suggested in some reports.

But the tragic, history of Somalia and its equally tragic effect on Malaysia's generosity continues.

• The writer is a former *New Straits Times* journalist. He was in Somalia "embedded" with Malbatt 1 (Malaysian Battalion 1) between August and November 1993, and covered the operation immortalised by the book and movie *Black Hawk Down*.



Somalis walking past a tank in the streets of Mogadishu last month. Volatility in the Horn of Africa nation has made it difficult for peace to be achieved, and although Malaysia tries to help, destiny is in the hands of the Somalis. — Reuters picture