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Memali tragedy blame game goes on

Old wounds were reopened by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's rather nonchalant account of the bloody clash in 1985, and PAS wants a Royal Commission of Inquiry for the truth to be told.

It was 1996, the editor of the newspaper I was working for then was upset about a story I had written about some overnight millionaires in a Felda scheme and, as punishment, sent me on an assignment to Baling, Kedah.

I was rather annoyed but, in hindsight, it was an eye-opening encounter with a less than familiar world and also the "other world" because I woke up in the government resthouse the next morning to find the laces of my sneakers completely undone and strung over a chair. I could only assume that it was the work of a playful ghost.

I was there to report on the 40th anniversary of the Baling Talks. But Baling is also where the Memali tragedy happened in 1985 and I would have driven right past Kampung Memali had it not been for the dead lamb on the road.

As I slowed down, I saw the house, its walls plastered with the PAS moon and political slogans blaming Umno for the Memali bloodbath. It was the home of the late Islamic preacher Ibrahim Mahmood aka Ibrahim Libya, the PAS leader killed in the Memali clash. He had revolution in his heart and had become a political threat to the authorities who accused him of deviationist teachings.

As I snapped photographs of the house, a bespectacled man of about 20 emerged, glaring at me. His

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name was Hazbullah and he was the eldest son of Ibrahim Libya. Like many PAS supporters in the village he was suspicious of outsiders after that dark day when 14 villagers and four policemen died in a violent confrontation.

It was quite a poignant moment when Hazbullah said he would never forget the day when the headmaster of the school in Pakistan where he was studying took him aside to say that "my father had died in a holy war".

The dead lamb on the road that day was an uncanny metaphor of how Ibrahim Libya had been portrayed as a sacrificial lamb. Emotions were still very raw then and the locals spoke about it in hushed tones.

The sense was that they were still trying to come to terms with the tragedy. There was sympathy even among those who did not approve of Ibrahim Libya's politics. A nurse I met spoke of oil drums used to collect the donations pouring in and she had gestured to show how women ripped off their jewellery

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Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang

to donate.

At the *sekotah pondok* (traditional religious school) that Ibrahim Libya started, the headmaster was puzzled that an outsider would be interested and had personally shown me around the modest school.

There was a poster of Ibrahim Libya at the entrance of one of the rooms and I was intrigued at how a blue curtain segregated the secondary level girls and boys who shared a classroom.

I read up on Memali after returning from Baling and pored over photographs from the incident – bodies of the victims, including Ibrahim Libya wrapped in white sheets and laid in a row on mats, a

woman weeping as she confronted security personnel and "weapons" seized from the group.

They were hardly what one would call weapons – more than a dozen parang, catapults, sickles used to tap rubber trees and some crude molotov cocktails. Apart from the molotov cocktails, the rest were common items in any rural household. They struck me as weapons of defence rather than weapons of attack.

It was all so long ago and Memali was buried at the back of my head until this week.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's take on Memali at his "Nothing to Hide" forum last Sunday revived long-buried resentment about Memali. It had to do with the rather matter-of-fact tone he assumed, that lack of remorse and his habit of blaming others for the wrongs of his administration. PAS leaders felt their blood boil with his claim that police retaliated after the villagers attacked them.

"There is no point talking about this black mark in history without repenting and seeking forgiveness or correcting the situation," said PAS president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang who has neither forgotten nor forgiven those responsible for what happened.

PAS politician Zuhdi Mat Piah, whose father was shot at 14 times during the Memali clash, also lashed

out at the former premier: "Your hands are covered with the blood of the victims of Memali. Although it was not you who shot and killed them, they died because of your order," he said.

Zuhdi's father survived his injuries and was detained under the ISA together with 30 others. He said villagers were "gunned down in front of their families, beaten up like animals and piled into trucks like garbage".

PAS has always rejected the Memali White Paper, saying it was "full of lies". Moreover, the White Paper has been compromised by the fact that Dr Mahathir had perpetuated the myth that he was overseas at the time of the clash. It was only in 2014 that he admitted he was actually in the country but continues to blame his then deputy Tun Musa Hitam.

PAS deputy president Datuk Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man has called for a Royal Commission of Inquiry to do justice to those who perished. There was no closure, the wounds have not healed even after so many years and our politicians keep trying to rewrite history to suit their agenda.

The calls for a RCI are growing louder and it is not without basis because there are many out there who deserve a credible account of what happened. Dr Mahathir should welcome it – who knows, it might actually clear him of blame.

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