

# SCENES IN IRAQ 'HAVE HAUNTED ME SINCE'

NST  
- 8/12/2021  
pg. 8

21 years on, Dr Siti Hasmah recounts humanitarian trip to Iraq in coffee table book

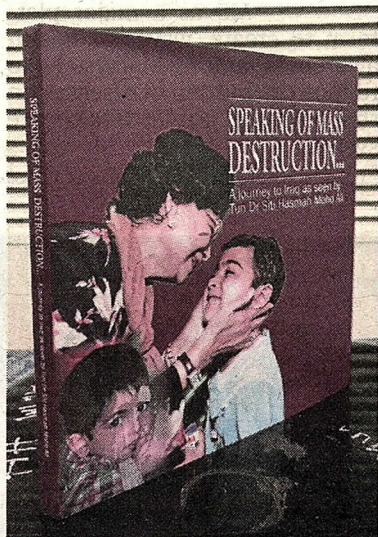
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“THE sufferings of the people of Iraq were witnessed first-hand by my delegation and the scenes have haunted me since.”

Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali said this at the launch of the coffee table book, *Speaking of Mass Destruction*, at the Perdana Leadership Foundation here on Friday.

The book, subtitled *A Journey to Iraq as Seen by Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali*, chronicles her visit to the war-torn country in 2000.

It portrays her experiences in Iraq and features photographs of



*Speaking of Mass Destruction — A Journey to Iraq as Seen by Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali*

the people she met there.

The humanitarian trip was dubbed by the then US secretary of state Madeleine Albright as “irrelevant” and “interference”. Twenty-one years later, this book written by Dr Siti Hasmah shows how important that visit was, in fact.



Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali speaking at the launch of her coffee table book at the Perdana Leadership Foundation in Putrajaya on Friday. With her are her husband and former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (centre) and former Iraqi ambassador to Malaysia Adnan Malik. PIC BY AZIAH AZMEE

“It was a favour requested by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was the fourth prime minister at the time, to have an on-the-ground assessment of Iraq and, of course, I said yes,” said Dr Siti Hasmah.

Dr Mahathir’s wife said she felt compelled to share what she saw in Iraq, which had been subjected to economic sanctions since 1990.

For the trip, Dr Siti Hasmah was joined by a small team of 11 women comprising Bakti (Association of Wives of Ministers) members, academics and doctors, as well as *New Straits Times* journalist Aishah Ali and NST photographer Ham Abu Bakar.

They were also accompanied by 10 male members and the then Iraqi ambassador to Malaysia, Adnan Malik.

The trip was highly controversial as never had a state leader nor their spouses visited Iraq, and Malaysia was the first nation to do so. It gave Dr Siti Hasmah the determination to learn more about the sufferings faced by the Iraqi people, especially the women and children.

“Being there, I was able to witness how the Iraqis, especially

the women and children, suffered due to the effects of war and sanctions.

“I was able to learn first-hand from United Nations officers of the horrors the people went through and lack of medical supplies. I am glad we were able to bring some medical supplies to assist them.

“One of the visits was to an air raid shelter, where the people left their children there for safety during the day. It was hit by two United States missiles, thinking the president was there.

“At the shelter, we saw palm prints and human skin stuck on the walls — it was heart-breaking. I met a mother who was grief-stricken just because she survived and all her children were left behind,” she said.

The place she spoke of was the Al-Amiriah shelter in Baghdad, which was bombed by the US in 1991, and left some 400 civilians, including children, dead.

Dr Siti Hasmah hoped that the 170-page coffee table book would send a message to developed nations to stop bullying and destroying the lives of innocent families and communities for their selfish gains.

Malaysia did not support the leadership of Iraq then and also did not condone the sanctions imposed on the country. The team led by Dr Siti Hasmah was there only to observe and report their assessment of the impact on women and children.

The 95-year-old activist said the book was also a clarion call to all leaders of Muslim countries to support one another and speak up against cruelty and injustices to humanity.

One of her experiences in Iraq, she said, was the secret visit with Iraqi president Saddam Hussein in Baghdad.

“I was informed by the Iraqi ambassador to Malaysia that Saddam wanted to meet with only me.

“When I entered the room, he shook my hand and said thank you to Malaysia and Dr Mahathir for appealing on Iraq’s behalf to lift the sanctions.

“He had this grandfather-like figure and was a gentle giant, and I had the privilege to meet him.”

Describing her experiences in Iraq, Dr Siti Hasmah said she never felt scared despite the unrest in the country.

“I was already in my 70s then, but I was energetic and eager to visit the hospitals and shelters. I was ready to punch anyone who wanted to take up a fight with me.

“It was a responsibility given to me by Dr Mahathir and I had to see for myself how we could help them, especially the women and children, and if what has been reported in the media was true.

“The book is written to support women and children in countries under conflict like Syria, Yemen, Palestine and Afghanistan, by donating the proceeds from the sale of the book to them.”

The book, which was 21 years in the making, went without a hitch, according to the book’s editor Aishah Ali, the former NST journalist who followed the mission to Iraq.

“Two decades is a long time, but Tun (Dr Siti Hasmah) remembers everything clearly.”

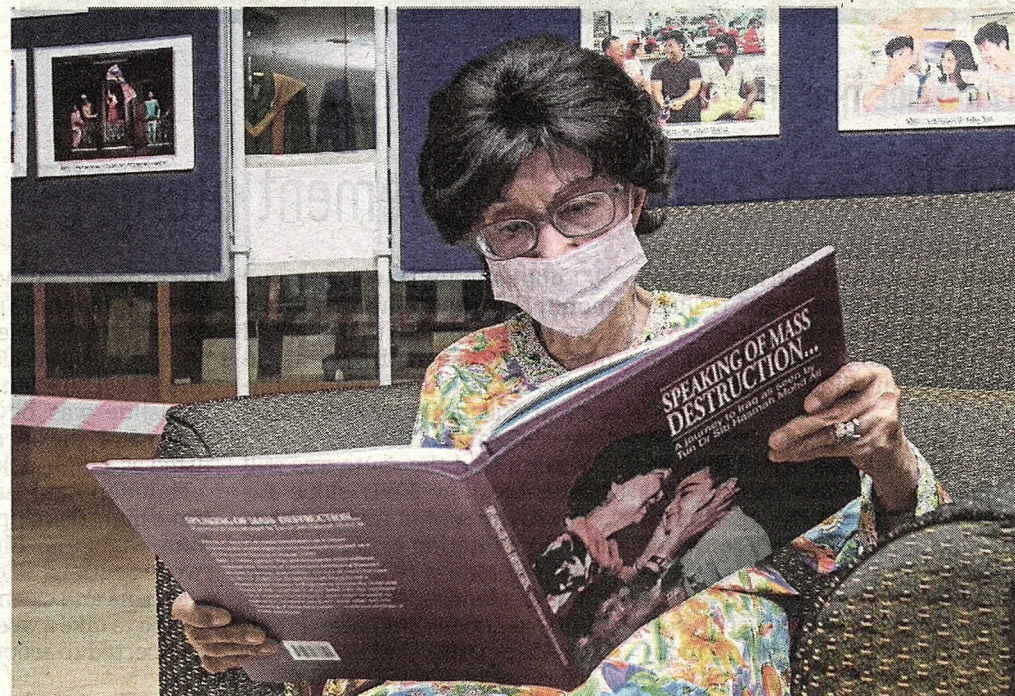
At the event, Dr Mahathir, who launched the book, said it would remind readers of the hypocrisy of leading nations that had styled themselves as being civilised and beacons of humanity.

“It was very courageous of Dr Siti Hasmah and the other ladies who embarked on the journey as the sanctions had made travelling restrictive and difficult.

“As I read through the chapters, indeed, only a mother could truly understand the pain of a child, and the children of Iraq who suffered from the sanctions, which were well captured in the book.”

One thousand copies of the book have been printed for the first edition and are priced at RM120 each.

Proceeds from the sale of the book will be channelled to charities that handle donations for children in conflict-stricken countries.



Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali browsing through her coffee table book. PIC BY AZIAH AZMEE