

Scars that won't go way

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Article

[The New Sunday Times - 02/18/2007](#)

The exhibits are an effective way of reminding us how fortunate we are, and how not to take for granted the prevailing peace and harmony among Malaysians.

"BARBARIC" is perhaps a rather polite choice of word to describe what I saw at the week-long exhibition on the fourth floor of PWTC which ended on Feb 11.



The exhibition drew horrified reaction from the public. But to the victims, it was all real as they suffered both physically and mentally.

Although it was make belief, it was certainly real enough for just about anyone who has not been in an actual war zone before.

The organisers of the international conference and exhibition on "Expose War Crimes: Criminalise War" showed how barbaric war can be.

On exhibit were images from Hiroshima and Nagasaki towards the end of World War II to My Lai during the Vietnam War, and in the Middle East, from Palestine to Qana and Iraq.

There were images, too, on the torture at the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisons.

Equally convincing were the replicas of weapons that were indiscriminately used, including "Little Boy", the atomic bombs used on Japan and cluster bombs. And with it, the unimaginable devastation these weapons had caused to children, women and innocent civilians.

What was most shocking was how a song, Boney M's *Rivers of Babylon*, was used as a medium of torture.

In fact, this was the closest that anyone could experience what torture was really all about—locked up in a room with the song blaring, non-stop. Imagine the lyrics, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion..." being continuously drummed into one's head continuously at full blast.

It is not surprising then that many visitors were caught staring motionless at the exhibits. What is usually seen on television, suddenly turned out to be so "real".

Yet, to Malaysia's only surviving atomic bomb victim, Datuk Abdul Razak Abdul Hamid, who was among the visitors, the exhibition captured only a fraction of what he had gone through. The fear and the screams of agony are something that no exhibition can ever accurately represent.

Similarly, the photograph of the "hooded-man" of Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, which is now a highly symbolic image of what torture stands for. Photographed in 2004 cloaked in black, it is that of a man standing on top of a small concrete block with his arms out-stretched, crucifixion-like.

Attached to his fingers are electrical wires from an electrical source.

At the conference, Ali Shalah, who claimed to be the hooded prisoner, recounted first-hand what it was really like. "It feels like fire passing through your veins and you are blinded by flashes and your eyes feel like they are going to explode."

There were times that Ali passed out when he was electrocuted several times.

Guns and broomsticks were also shoved up his anus.

Once, when blood flowed from his mouth, a doctor was called in. And when it was found that the blood was from his bleeding tongue, the torture resumed.

Ali was 46 years then and working as a university lecturer in Baghdad, when he was wrongly arrested. He was later quietly released.

Today, the visible signs of the torture are his left hand which is deformed and the fingers twisted.

The other scars of the torture, like the marks on his body from being stomped and kicked as well as the burn marks from lighted cigarettes are all gone but not the mental scarring. Till today, Ali can still recall, with a shudder, the words of *Rivers of Babylon*.

Although there was a large turnout at the exhibition and many Malaysians participated in the conference, there could have been more.

The exhibits are an effective way of reminding us how fortunate we all are, and how not to take for granted the prevailing peace and harmony among Malaysians.

Instead, at every opportunity, we must reaffirm our good fortune as a nation, like today as we celebrate the Chinese New Year.

In conjunction with this, soon we will be celebrating another national open house to mark the occasion.

It is, therefore, opportune for us to examine how much such festivals have opened our hearts and minds to the other communities.

Much of the sharing is enshrined by the spirit of *kongsi*, so central to all the celebrations in Malaysia, not least Chinese New Year, which have brought us closer to understanding one other.

Or are we still stuck at the level of sharing delicacies and cuisine, and the rituals of exchanging tangible gifts? If so, what can we do to make it better? Already, we read about worrying trends of the erosion of traditional values each time a festival comes up.

One political service centre recently expressed concern that the age-old practice of filial piety in the community was under threat.

What is more, it claimed that those involved were "well-to-do individuals with sound financial capabilities".

Compare this to the current illegal loan-shark, or Ah Long, menace. It is difficult to reconcile what sharing really means. If a community noted for its economic success can allow its members to be threatened by unscrupulous Ah Long, what hope is there for the lesser ones?

In other words, we need more than just the superficiality of the open house to fathom what *kongsi* really means, beyond the artificial limits of ethnicity and religio-cultural boundaries.

For example, we must be courageous enough to resist all forms of myopic tendencies such as the tagging of houses of worship or Vision Schools with some ethnic labels, as reported recently.

If we do not break away from these archaic mindsets, and soon, the risk is that the make-belief barbarism displayed at the exhibition at PWTC may some day become real for us Malaysians.

Meanwhile, let us hope that the 2007 Chinese New Year will not only bring much joy and prosperity, but also the urgent need for wisdom and sanity to all Malaysians. I wish all Malaysian Chinese *Gong Xi Fa Cai*.

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