

Relearn how to make and keep friendships the way children do

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Article

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DURING this Hari Raya celebration, at least one girl will be very unhappy. Nur Liyana has just lost a dear friend — Huang Na (picture).

They were the best of pals. They attended school together and "chatted non-stop while walking home" almost everyday.

Under the watchful eye of Nur's grandmother, they shared, played and laughed together.

Then a month ago, eight-year-old Huang Na vanished.

Nur waited patiently for her friend to return. Eventually, it became clear she was gone forever. Huang Na was found murdered, her body stuffed in a box in dense undergrowth in Singapore.

A spirit of honest friendship that resonates in the nation as we celebrate Hari Raya and Deepavali.



If Huang Na were still around, Nur's Hari Raya would be that much more special. There is a lesson in this for everyone that goes beyond any festive season.

The story of the two girls cannot be more relevant, especially to those living in south Thailand, many of whom will be celebrating Hari Raya.

Since the start of the year, more than 400 people have died in south Thailand, a place with a long and unattended history of discontent.

Perhaps it is time for us adults to re-learn how to make and keep friendships, the way children do so naturally.

We should first be prepared to shed our hypocrisy, as demanded by the spirit of Hari Raya, Deepavali and the soon-to-come Christmas and Chinese New Year.

Failing to do so, and resorting to tough talk to launch crackdowns, be it in Narathiwat, Falluja, Palestine or anywhere else, will only create further chaos as emotions harden into more hatred.

The events of last month in south Thailand is a case in point.

So, too, in Iraq, where the endless bombardment of towns to silence discontent among the so-called 'insurgents' has given rise to even more suicide attacks.

Prominent religious scholars in Saudi Arabia have taken a harder position by collectively declaring support for militants fighting US-led forces in Iraq.

They were reported as saying a holy war against occupiers was a duty, and urged Muslims to "stand by their brothers in Iraq". A Nov 5 statement said it was a "jihad to drive back the assailants".

One can only foresee more carnage, given the belief that one person's liberator is another's assailant; one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter.

It is, thus, interesting to note that a US sergeant-major recently proudly compared the assault on Falluja in Iraq to that on the Vietnamese city of Hue during the 1968 Tet Offensive, likening to "another history in the making".

"There was nothing worse than to fight the wrong war," said General Saiyud of Thailand (*Straits Times*. Nov 30).

The general should know, because he has been credited with the implementation of successful solutions in the 1970s and 1980s.

He emphasised: "The key is people. You have to keep asking yourself, 'What are the reasons for popular discontent? What are the problems?'"

Pre-emptive strikes and other military actions, based on lies or faulty intelligence, will not generate long-lasting solutions if these questions are not answered.

To be sure, even the greatest transformation in a victim's economy can be made hostage to social discontents, marked by deep inequalities, ruthless exploitation and high-handedness.

Ironically, even as we express concerns about conflicts abroad, we ignore the problems right before us. It is indeed shameful and highly hypocritical to dwell on the niceties of the festive seasons, yet allow the true spirit of each season to be squandered away.

We dare stand in front of God in prayer and pretend we are all His devout children, while the senseless proxy killings continue.

Some are still trying to justify these actions in His name, if not by the command of God. The true spirit of the festive season desperately needs reviving.

Wishing our Muslim and Hindu readers, Selamat Hari Raya and Happy Deepavali. May the festive spirit live on forever.

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