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The uncertain world of Malaysia's invisible children

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Making a visible difference

They are the truly marginalised and neglected in Malaysia - the trafficked children, the refugee children, the indigenous children and numerous others whose basic needs are denied. And the tragedy is that they are invisible, SURAYA AL-ATTAS writes.

MUCH has been said about invisible children but how many of us have actually looked at the face of, say, a Rohingya child begging on the streets of Kuala Lumpur and wondered – after having done our good deed of the day by handing over a few crumpled notes – what his hopes and dreams are?

Or, after having read about the miraculous survival of an infant dumped in a ditch somewhere and had a heated

debate on the appalling act of the parent(s), stopped to think just what kind of a future will a baby without a birth certificate have?

And, on a less gloomy note (if you can call it that), what about the stateless children adopted by Malaysians? They may have roofs over their heads but, without proper documentation, are deprived of basic needs – access to education being one of them.

These are but a few situations that plague the children of this country – Malaysians by birth as well as those who call Malaysia “home”.

For many of us, the term “invisible children” refers to the obvious groups of

children: Stateless, street and refugee/asylum-seeking. Truth is, it encompasses so much more.

Children living with HIV, children with learning disabilities, children who are physically impaired are all invisible, as far as Dr Hartini Zainudin, better known as Tini, is concerned.

The child activist and founder of Yayasan Chow Kit – a one-stop 24-hour crisis centre that provides protection to the street children of Chow Kit in Kuala Lumpur as well as handles child-trafficking cases – says it depends on what one’s definition of invisible children is.

“For me it’s any child who is marginalised and neglected – trafficked children who haven’t been found, refugee children, ‘*anak orang asal*’ (indigenous children). In short it’s any child whose basic needs are not being met – right to education, healthcare, food, shelter and protection.

“This issue has a lot to do with attitude and priority. It shouldn’t be politicised and we really shouldn’t make it about religion. We can make these children visible by understanding that they all have rights and needs.

“We’re not asking for certain rights to be more than those of other Malaysian children; we’re just asking for equal rights. For instance, we’re not asking for air-conditioning in schools, we’re saying just let them go to school, let them have the same health benefits or let them have birth certs.”

The list of children who are considered invisible is endless and the number may be too huge for us to wrap our heads around, but Tini insists that it’s not impossible to find a solution.

“If we sincerely want to make a difference, we need to look at the root causes. It’s not that difficult. Really, at the end of the day, it’s less expensive than building rehabilitation centres.”

DR HARTINI ZAINUDIN





PHOTOS by HAM ABU BAKAR

INVISIBLE CHILDREN ARE DEPRIVED OF THE MOST BASIC NEEDS - INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION. INFORMAL LEARNING CENTRES, SUCH AS THE ONE BELOW, ARE TOO FEW AND FAR BETWEEN AND MORE OFTEN THAN NOT ARE POORLY-FINANCED, UNDERSTAFFED AND ONLY PROVIDE A VERY BASIC EDUCATION

The indefatigable Tini ought to know. Since she returned to Malaysia 13 years ago, after having spent two decades in New York, she has devoted almost all of her time working with disenfranchised children.

While the government – via the ministries of Women, Family and Community Development, Home Affairs, Education and Health – acknowledges the urgent need to address this issue, things are still plodding along.

“All these ministries would be involved in one way or another in ensuring that these children are not invisible. While they are aware of these issues, no plan of action has been drawn up.”

Happily though, the non-governmental organisations have at least made some headway with the Attorney General’s Chambers and it couldn’t have happened soon enough, says Tini.

“For the first time, I felt they understood the impact of the current laws and bills in terms of the protection of children. The Attorney General himself recently sat down with us for two hours to look into the issue of trafficked children and worked out what needs to be done in terms of amendments and documentations.

“What’s even more wonderful is that a task force was immediately set up to look into this matter, which means they’re really serious about it.”

The next step, she adds, is for the relevant ministries to work together in finding the best possible solution.

“When people say it’s not as easy as that... I say ‘Yeah, it should be as easy as that when you’re talking about children.’”

The Home Affairs Ministry, she explains, had looked into the issues of trafficked, stateless and street children – how better protection can be provided to the children and how to at least get them recognised and not invisible.

“The ministry, under the former minister, had started a pilot project for trafficked/stateless children who have been adopted by Malaysians. This is the most visible group among the invisible because their adoptive parents are Malaysians.

“The ministry was already looking at how they could obtain their citizenship faster. Unfortunately, things have stalled since January.”

With regards to education, continues Tini, discussions have been going on with the Ministry of Education for over a year now on the setting up of schools/learning centres for children with no documents.

“We had a verbal negotiation and the outcome was positive but because there was nothing in writing, nothing came out of it. With the Ministry of Health, we haven’t made any headway at all.”

Another major concern, says Tini, is the issue of baby-selling. The children, if found, become stateless. If adopted and the adoptive parents are caught with



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falsified information, they still become stateless.

To all intents and purposes, she says, these children are the most invisible because “we don’t know who’s trading them and who’s buying them”.

“Potential buyers may say they are concerned and want to give the children a family environment. But how many are really being brought up in a family environment? And how many are actually being brought up as servants and for sexual exploitation?”

“Now if you want to talk about the literal meaning of invisible, that’s invisible for you!

“You don’t see them but you know it’s happening... and the scary part is you don’t know where they’re going and what’s going to happen to them.

“What we need now are champions for children who are refugees and stateless... but no one wants to take up these sensitive causes.”

Tini cites the heartbreaking story of a 17-year-old stateless boy from Chow Kit, who is friends with her on Facebook. “The day before the SPM examination started, I saw his update on Facebook; he posted a good luck message to all his friends who were sitting for the exam,” says Tini, tearing up.

“He’s so, so bright. He’s taking care of his diabetic father who uses a wheelchair and he’s had to work since he was 12. He didn’t have to cry to show he’s in pain. All

he did was post that little message and it spoke louder than anything.

“He’s a really sweet kid but he won’t stay a sweet kid forever. Eventually he’s just going to lose hope.”

So, in the scheme of things, where does Malaysia stand – compared with other Southeast Asian countries – when it comes to addressing the issue of invisible children?

Well, according to Tini, while we’re not the worst, there’s certainly much we can learn from other nations, particularly (and surprisingly...) Cambodia and Laos.

“If you look at these two nations, while there is discrimination against refugee children, they are, however, allowed to go to school. Their parents are allowed to work part-time. At least some of their basic needs are being met.

“Our government and authorities are beginning to understand the different groups of stateless people but the difference (compared with some of the Southeast Asian countries) is that we don’t allow them any access to free education and health facilities. Even in Indonesia, which has a larger group of stateless people, they’re allowed to go to school.

“I think for us, it all boils down to the perception that they’re all foreigners. Really? Stateless people, as far as I’m concerned, belong to us. They’re here, they’re not going anywhere so we’d better take care of them.”

The reluctant humanitarian hero

French politician, activist and co-founder of Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), Dr Bernard Kouchner is not in the business for the glory. One is humbled by his lifelong mission to save lives and ensure everyone has the right to medical care, finds SURAYA AL-ATTAS.

DR BERNARD Kouchner has no time for niceties. He's too busy saving the world to bother with such banalities.

If you happen to be a victim of circumstances or miscommunication in your effort to reach him, then it's your tough luck. For Dr Kouchner has little patience for something as dull as glitches and snafus. Try explaining yourself away and you'd likely be on the receiving end of his sharp tongue.

As grandfatherly and kindly as he might come across at the first encounter, the 74-year-old French politician, activist and co-founder of *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) – also known as Doctors Without Borders – didn't get to be where he is today by being overly mindful of his Ps and Qs.

There are many things Dr Kouchner doesn't care to talk about – himself, for one. But steer him to his favourite subject – his work – and the passion comes through loud and clear. Pin him down for his view on the longstanding debate as to whether humanitarian efforts and politics should go hand-in-hand and he will give you a list of reasons why it should. Aah... so you've touched a nerve.

(For the record, Dr Kouchner has held several ministerial positions in the French government, having been the Health Minister twice – from 1992 to 1993, under president Francois Mitterrand, and from 1997-1999, under president Jacques Chirac; as well as Minister of Foreign and European Affairs between 2007 and 2010, under president Nicolas Sarkozy).

"You cannot separate humanitarian medicine, emergency medicine and politics but not politics in the vulgar sense of the word. It's not about waiting for the bomb (to explode) so you can take care of the people who are being bombed or welcoming starvation in order to take care of the starved.

"Ideologically and morally, medicine and politics should be able to work together, at the very least. I don't expect a humanitarian to go to war or kill people but if you want to help somebody in, say, Syria, you have to be involved in politics because it means having to cross the border. Borders are made not to be crossed.

"But crossing the border illegally to take care of somebody who needs you, then that's politics... in a human and sensitive sense of the word.

"You do it because you regard human beings as the same from both sides of the divide or because you believe that suffering is suffering no matter what the skin colour. That's the whole purpose of Doctors Without Borders," said Dr Kouchner when met in Putrajaya, where he was one of the speakers at the World Marketing Summit, recently.



Photo by MOHD FIRDAUS ABDUL LATIF

DR BERNARD KOUCHNER

His detractors, particularly from the very organisation he co-founded, don't share his sentiments, though. In fact, in May 2007, soon after Dr Kouchner was appointed Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, MSF went so far as to issue a statement to clarify its association with him. Among others, a few days after Dr Kouchner's appointment, MSF noted:

"...a potential confusion between his new responsibilities and the role he has played in humanitarian organisations such as MSF. The mixing of politics and humanitarian action is fundamentally prejudicial to our activities and to the deployment of impartial and independent assistance on the field. In such contexts as conflicts, it may be particularly dangerous.

"This is why we consider it fundamental to clarify the relations between Dr Kouchner and MSF, and to reassert our independence towards the French authorities and any other political power."

Dr Kouchner, who left the organisation in 1979, was not in the least perturbed though. "I don't care about what they think. I only care about the victims. Ask the victims and they will say that they're in favour of humanitarian intervention.

"A doctor is only interested in satisfying his patients; of course their families or people living on the other side of the world are entitled to their opinions but doctors have to respond to the demands of their patients first."

Arguably the first person to challenge the Red Cross' stance of neutrality and silence in wars and massacres, Dr Kouchner has played a pivotal role in international

humanitarian efforts over the decades. As France's Minister of Health and Humanitarian affairs, he had convinced the United Nations to accept "the right to interfere" resolution, and after devastating civil wars in the Balkans, served as Special Representative to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in Kosovo.

A gastroenterologist by training, Dr Kouchner was one of a small group of people comprising French doctors and journalists who set up MSF in Paris in 1971. The organisation was created based on their belief that people have the right to medical care regardless of race, religion, creed or political affiliation and that the needs of these people take precedence over the respect for national borders.

In his eight years with MSF, Dr Kouchner had led medical relief teams into the worst disaster areas and bloodiest of war zones to offer aid to victims. Even after he left, he has continued to be vocal about human rights abuses. Today MSF, which received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999, is an international organisation working in more than 60 countries to assist people whose survival is

threatened by violence, neglect or catastrophe.

"MSF is a much better organisation now. Doctors stay in the mission longer as opposed to the early days; we were considered lucky then to be able to get a specialist to stay for two months. Nowadays, they stay for a year or two."

Then, almost in the same breath and with a slight smirk, he went on to say MSF runs almost like a political party these days. "The staff maintains power in MSF for years and years. But it doesn't change my opinion that it's a much better organisation today – it's more efficient and better equipped."

Over the decades, Dr Kouchner has received numerous awards and honours for his work, including the Dag Hammarskjöld Award in 1979, the Louise Weiss Prize of the European Parliament (1979), the Athinaï Prize of the Alexander Onassis Foundation (1981) and the Prix Europe (1984).

While there are many who don't agree with him, there are just as many, if not more, who regard him as a hero. Former South African president Nelson Mandela was reported to have once whispered to him, "Thanks for intervening in matters that don't concern you."

"Hero? Pff...", he brushed aside in that typical French gesture.

"I've given away around 1000 *Légion d'Honneur* (Legion of Honour) awards. I have none. I was not looking for that. That was not my motivation.

"But if you decide that I'm a hero then okay I'll accept it," he said with the first hint of a smile just as our session came to an end.

Looming large

The only one in his family to keep the legacy alive, Terengganu 'songket'-weaver Hafsin Abdul Aziz is bent on not letting the craft vanish into oblivion, writes SURAYA AL-ATTAS



SOME OF THE STUNNING 'SONGKET' PIECES IN HAFSIN'S COLLECTION

IN a workshop filled with centuries-old looms, Hafsin Abdul Aziz is intently going about his daily routine, one he's been doing for the past 30 years. The 48-year-old *songket* master's workstation is a sharp contrast to those of the elderly village women whose looms are usually placed in the verandahs or under their stilt houses.

Actually up until four years ago, Hafsin had been doing just that – making beautiful *songket* from under his wooden stilt house in Kampung Losong, Kuala Terengganu. His home has since gone through a transformation; the stilts are gone and it's now a double-storey part-wooden, part-brick abode. The workshop is just a few steps away. Hafsin proudly declares that "it's a gift from Kraftangan (Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation) for my loyalty."

His association with Kraftangan began right after he got out of school. After he completed Form Five, Hafsin did a six-month course at Kraftangan, learning the initial process of *songket*-making, ("... stuff I couldn't learn from my elders because they didn't know how to... things like dyeing yarns and designing, etc"), after which he served Kraftangan for about one-and-a-half-years.

"After that I did a short stint at Sutera Semai Centre in Kuala Terengganu before branching out on my own. I was in my early 20s when I started taking orders from Kraftangan and individuals. Till today, I'm still producing *songket* for Kraftangan," says Hafsin of his longstanding relationship with the corporation.

Coming from a family of *songket*-weavers, it was only natural that Hafsin followed suit. It started with his grandmother, who passed down the skill to his mother, who in turn taught her children. Of his 13 siblings, nine of them, including Hafsin, could weave.

"The other eight were the girls in the family; I was the only male," smiles Hafsin, adding that he really started *songket* weaving at the age of 12. Interestingly, he's the only one keeping the family legacy alive today.

"My sisters quit after they got married. I'm glad I had the interest to do this. Nobody pushed me in this direction; I wanted to do it because it's my heritage and I wanted to make sure it doesn't die," says the father of four who has passed on the tradition to his 18-year-old daughter and 16-year-old son.

As it is, *songket*-weavers in Terengganu are becoming a rare breed. You'd be hard-pressed to find older folk in this industry these days, notes Hafsin. "Most of them would stop weaving after their children have grown up and started working. Most of these women put their children through school from the income they made by weaving *songket*."

"So when their children are old enough to support them, they'd naturally want their mothers to stop working," says Hafsin who has, over the years, been collecting antique *songket* looms from villagers who've retired so that he could start offering internships at his workshop.

The future of Terengganu *songket* may be less gloomy if the void left by the elders is filled by a new generation of weavers. Unfortunately, laments Hafsin, very few young people have the patience to learn, much less master, this traditional craft.

But then, after watching Hafsin at work, you tend to understand why *songket*-making may not be for everybody. It's a tedious and painstaking process, one that requires a tremendous amount of patience and concentration.

Hafsin, of course, makes it look easy, having been at it for the most part of his life. It's quite amazing to see his nimble fingers gathering clumps of disorderly silk thread on the warp and turning them into pretty patterns.

He's particularly proud of the fact that his yarns are dyed using natural ingredients like calamansi, bilimbi fruit, tamarind peels, citronella, pandan leaves and galangal leaves, among others, to produce a variety of colours and scents (for the textile). The dyeing process, says Hafsin, usually takes about three days.

As he demonstrated the process of *menerai benang* (the unwinding of silk skeins on a spindle and re-wound onto bamboo spools before they go on the warp), the threads broke several times. Without so much as a sigh, Hafsin tied the threads back together and continued with the task. This happened a few times but Hafsin didn't look bothered by the break in momentum at all. Certainly not the kind of job for someone with a short fuse, this.

The work that goes into producing *songket* is nothing if not elaborate. Hafsin says when he sits in the workshop weaving from morning to evening, with just one short break in between, all he can manage is about three inches.

Indeed, only after watching firsthand how it's done that you begin to appreciate its value and understand why a hand-woven *songket* piece is costly.

Speaking of which, Hafsin says his most expensive piece to date is a RM23,000 *sampin* (a knee-length piece of cloth worn over a man's *baju melayu*), which took him eight months to complete. It was ordered by Kraftangan and Hafsin reckons by the time it reached the client the *sampin* would have multiplied in price.

With weavers becoming scarce today, the experienced ones can actually command a high fee for weaving jobs, says Hafsin. He explains that most of the womenfolk of Terengganu prefer to earn a wage from weaving rather than produce everything from scratch on their own. "For

them, it makes better sense to take on jobs from people like me. It has become very tough for them because the middlemen would always demand for the prices to be kept low because of the stiff competition with the mass-produced (mechanised) *songket*. The cheapest hand-woven *songket* would probably be priced at RM150 but then you'd get middlemen saying they can get a piece for RM30 at Jalan Masjid India in KL... how do you compete with that?

"That's why earning a wage is a better option for them. They can get paid up to RM700 for a piece of silk *songket*, which takes about 10 days to do."

That said, Hafsin is not about to let the craft vanish into oblivion. While he continues to produce stunning *songket* pieces, he's also bent on encouraging as many young people to keep the art form alive. "My workshop is always open for



HAFSIN IS ESPECIALLY PROUD OF THE FACT THAT HIS YARNS, OBTAINED FROM CHINA, ARE DYED USING NATURAL INGREDIENTS



THE PROCESS OF 'MENERAI BENANG' MUST BE THE MOST TRYING ON ONE'S PATIENCE BUT HAFSIN GOES THROUGH IT WITHOUT BREAKING A SWEAT, EVEN IF HE HAS TO REPEATEDLY TIE BROKEN THREADS TOGETHER DURING THE EXERCISE



SO TEDIOUS IS THE ART OF WEAVING THAT HAFSIN CAN ONLY MANAGE ABOUT THREE INCHES IF HE SITS AT THE WORKSHOP FROM MORNING TO EVENING



TO THE UNTRAINED EYE, THESE LOOK LIKE CLUMPS OF DISORDERLY SILK THREAD. IT'S AMAZING TO SEE HAFSIN'S DEFT FINGERS TURNING THEM INTO PRETTY PATTERNS

internship. I get young people here all year round. I also get secondary school students coming here to learn about the craft.

"Some students who have learned to weave can't come to the workshop so I'd send the looms to their homes."

So how long does it take for one to learn to weave? "Six months. All you need is six months of training and you'd be ready to take orders," says Hafsin confidently. Maybe so, but you'd probably need another three years to learn how to keep your cool throughout the process.