



Marwa didn't want to leave the first time she boarded the big blue bus. — Photos: AP

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# Telling a story of hope

In a country with one of the world's lowest literacy rates, a simple mobile library feeds minds eager for education.

By ZABIHULLAH NOORI

UNDETERRED by the risk of suicide bombers, 25-year-old Freshta Karim travels around Afghanistan's troubled capital every day in a big, blue bus to share the magic of reading with children.

After graduating from Britain's prestigious University of Oxford, she set up Kabul's first mobile library to let some of Afghanistan's 3.5 million out-of-school children – mostly girls – listen to stories and pore over picture books.

"When I was a child, I did not

have the opportunity to go to a library and read the storybooks I wanted to read," she says in a phone interview from Kabul.

"My goal is to enable them not only to think critically, but also to be able to question the wrongdoing they see." Afghanistan has one of the world's lowest literacy rates, with only three in 10 adults able to read, according to the United Nations cultural agency, Unesco.

The Taliban have been waging an insurgency to overthrow Kabul's Western-backed government since their 2001 ouster and control large

parts of the country.

While the education system has made significant gains since the Taliban era – when girls were excluded from formal education altogether – worsening security has forced many school closures.

After decades of war, more than four in 10 Afghan children are not in school, government data shows, with many working to support their families.

Karim set up the Charmaghz – meaning walnut in Dari – mobile library with three friends in January in a bus rented from the



Children are always eager to board the bus when it appears in their neighbourhood.



One of the Terengganu mobile libraries visiting a school in Kuala Terengganu. — Terengganu Public Library Corporation

# Readers on the road

By **TERENCE TOH**  
star2@thestar.com.my

DID you know that Malaysia has its own versions of Kabul's story book bus? Many states have had government-sponsored mobile libraries since the early days. They are usually created to serve rural areas or lower income populations with less access to books.

Sibu, Sarawak, for example, has had one since 1995. The Kedah State Library Corporation's mobile library started in 1978, and currently has five units operating.

The Terengganu mobile library is fairly representative of most of these libraries. It began in June 1982 as an initiative by the Terengganu Public Library Corporation to give rural citizens easier access to books.

The service currently has four units, which operate from state public libraries in Kuala Terengganu, the Kemaman District public library, and the Besut District public library. All these units have recently been upgraded with a sys-

M/S D T O L,

tem that allows users to register as members online instead of having to do so manually. The units also come equipped with state of the art facilities such as air-conditioning, LCD projectors and televisions.

Response to these mobile libraries has been encouraging: from 2015 to 2017, the Kuala Terengganu mobile libraries recorded 22,075 visitors (with 3,798 people becoming members) while the Kemaman mobile library recorded 16,761 visitors (with 2,576 members).

In Selangor, the Smart Selangor Mobile Library (SSML) started as a joint project between the Selangor Housing and Real Estate Board and the Selangor Public Library Corporation. The state-funded project was envisioned as an outreach programme for youths in low cost flats all around the state.

SSML started in March last year with four mobile units serving the areas of Petaling Jaya, Ampang, Selayang and Kajang.

Today, there are seven units, some of which visit two places or local councils a day.



'The libraries can bring people together,' says Mastura. — YAP CHEE HONG/The Star

Selangor Housing and Real Estate Board director Mastura Haji Muhammad says the mobile libraries provide valuable services, as they could inspire a love of learning among less-privileged youths. This would cause other effects, like reduced crime rates in the area.

"The libraries can bring people



Nine-year-old Zainab enjoying a rare treat in her life: a story book.



Karim (right) helping children to read books inside her bus.

government, and painted it with colourful symbols, stars, balloons and footprints to attract children.

They installed bookshelves above the windows and chairs and desks for children and adults to sit and read – a luxury in a country where four in 10 schools do not even have a building, according to Human Rights Watch.

A sign over the windscreen reads “4 Maghz”, or four minds, to spark the interest of passers-by.

“We intentionally did it to provoke the people’s thought – whether we mean a walnut or four

fiction books.

“I love the mobile library,” says Farid, a nine-year-old shoeshine boy who is his family’s breadwinner and, like many Afghans, who goes by one name.

“I was there with another 10 children and the boy read a story to us. I really enjoyed my time there.”

Marwa, an 11-year-old in western Kabul, can hardly wait for the bus to arrive to jump in and start reading. She says in an AP report: “The first day I came on the bus, I was so happy that I didn’t want to leave and go home.”

Nazim, a 10-year-old who lives in

donors for support, preferring to rely on donations from friends and relatives, and plans to charge users.

“No matter how small, but I would like them to pay something,” she says.

“By putting a fee for the service, I encourage the children to value their time they spend in the library.” Streetchildren who cannot pay can donate a drawing or painting, she says.

It is not yet clear whether locals will be able to keep the mobile library running, but Karim is optimistic.

“The other day an army officer



hinds,” says Karim, who went to school as a refugee in Pakistan and then won scholarships to study abroad.

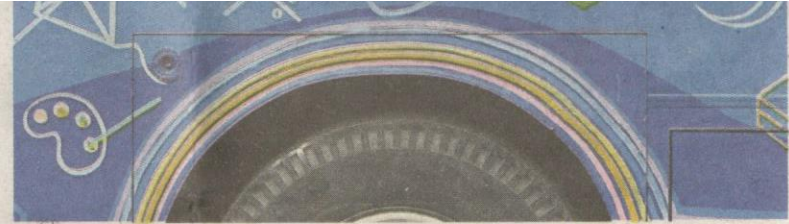
Residents of Kabul have welcomed the library on wheels, which stops for three or four hours at a time in different parts of the city so that children can climb on board to read hundreds of fiction and non-

fiction,” says Karim, who lives in northern Kabul, heard about the mobile library from relatives in the west of the city. “My 12-year-old son keeps asking me almost every day about the mobile library and when will it come to our area,” he says.

Karim says she has not approached any international

“The other day an army officer brought his young son into the bus and read him a book,” she says, adding that he donated 20 afghanis (RM1.10).

“We decided to keep that money and frame it because this is the very first donation that we got from the community.” — Thomson Reuters Foundation



The kids are happy to show off what they're reading in the bus.



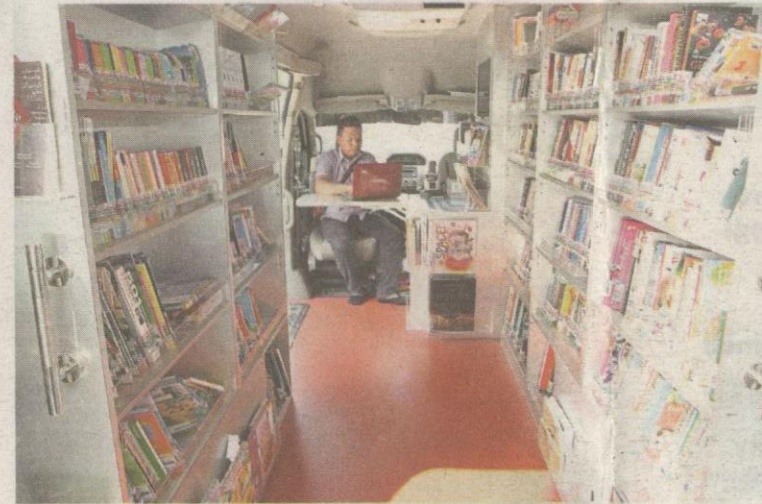
Children and parents alike using one of the Smart Selangor Mobile Libraries. — Selangor Public Library Corporation

together. If people keep coming to the libraries, they will become more creative, more confident, their self-esteem can rise. And that will help them to get better careers in the future,” says Mastura at a recent interview in Shah Alam.

According to Mastura, each of the mobile libraries is housed in a van; this is so drivers do not need special bus licenses, and also to make it

easier for them to travel into less-developed, rural areas. Many of the vans bear motivational quotations and sayings on their exteriors – to create a conducive atmosphere for learning, says Mastura.

Each unit carries about 1,500 books, with titles available in English, Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and Arabic. Digital services, in the form of WiFi and laptops, are also availa-



The inside of one of Selangor's mobile libraries. — YAP CHEE HONG/The Star

ble. While the mobile libraries are targeted mostly at children and youths, there are also titles and reference books for older patrons to enjoy.

“Nowadays in our library, we even have datuk-nenek and all coming. Our new modern concept attracts even the adults, there are recipe books and novels for them. I think we can get all these people of

different ages to the library, and I think that can change the country,” Mastura says.

Any member of the public can sit down and read the books; borrowing them, however, requires membership, which is free. Every member is allowed to borrow up to 10 books for a period of three weeks.

“I’ve had whole families come to the library. Five members in the

family, so 50 books in total! We had to offer them bags to take the books home,” Mastura recalls with a laugh.

Each mobile library could usually only fit four to five people at a time so many of them also carry bean-bags and portable tables that are placed outside the van, usually in a shady spot, so more people can read at the same time.

Maintaining their mobile libraries, Mastura says, usually cost about RM400,000 a year. Challenges include making sure the library supplies books that the public enjoy, keeping to service standards, and ensuring there are enough staff to properly maintain all the libraries.

Reception to the mobile libraries so far has been good, Mastura says, noting that the four original units recorded about 32,000 visitors since they started last year. While specific book tastes differ by area, the most popular reads seem to be novels, cookbooks, religious books and children’s picture/pop-up books.

Mastura hopes that, eventually, each of Selangor’s nine districts will have its own mobile library.

“Receiving good feedback, hearing that we’ve helped people, is always great,” she says.