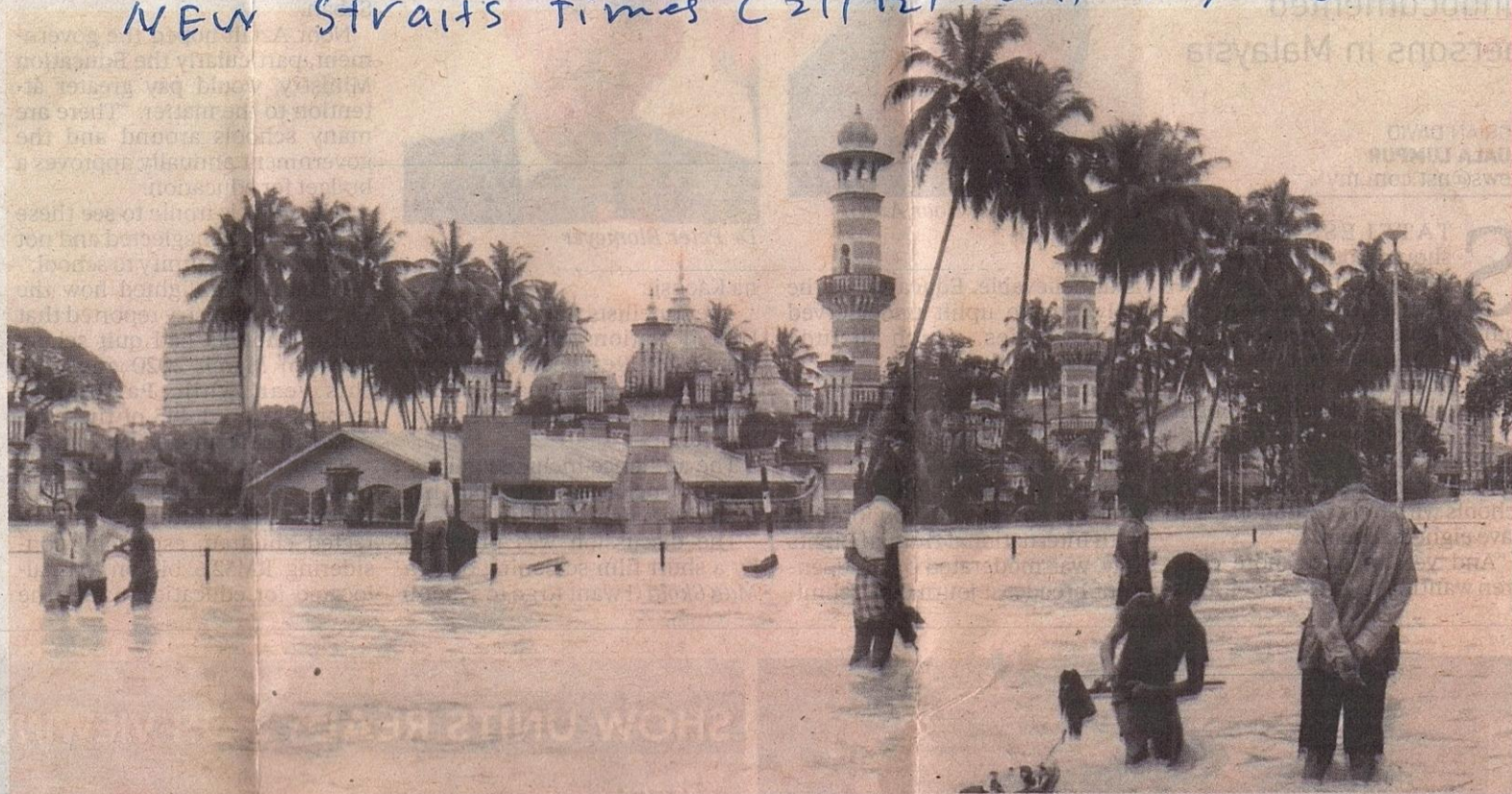


HOW KUALA LUMPUR WEATHERED THE FLOODS 50 YEARS AGO

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With the current massive inundation bringing widespread devastation and untold misery, **Alan Teh Leam Seng** turns back the clock to look at near similar effects suffered half a century ago

OVER 34,000 victims evacuated. Septuagenarian dies while trapped at home. Mother and daughter waded through floods in eight-hour journey home, and 333 electrical substations closed. These were among the headlines that gripped the nation recently as heavy downpours, equivalent in volume to an average monthly rainfall, inundated



Masjid Jamek, located at the Sungai Gombak and Sungai Klang confluence, was severely inundated. PIX BY ALAN TEH LEAM SENG

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average monthly rainfall, inundated many parts of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor as well as several other states.

Considered a one-in-100-year weather event, this rare phenomenon has brought misery to countless Malaysians after monsoon flow factors and surprisingly low weather pressures combined to form an extremely lethal tropical depression over the South China Sea. Within just a few short days, this exceptional weather occurrence swept westwards towards Peninsular Malaysia, bringing continuous

heavy rain in its wake.

While visiting victims at the Sultan Sulaiman Club evacuation centre in the federal capital, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah described the flood situation as similar to the catastrophic deluge, which hit many parts of Malaysia exactly 50 years ago.

His Majesty's comment brings to mind a recently purchased collection of vivid images recording the widespread inundation in Kuala Lumpur, which took place during the early days of January

1971. The photographs, probably the work of an enterprising Southern Photo Service employee in Batu Road (now Jalan Tun Anku Abdul Rahman), puts on record the devastation caused by ravaging flood waters.

A TOWN PARALYSED

Starting off with seemingly harmless dreary skies and intermittent showers on New Year's Day 1971, the weather quickly took a turn for the worse. An intense tropical storm formed in a blink of an eye and quickly swept across the nation while wreaking

havoc in most parts of the peninsula, except for Penang, Perlis and Kedah.

Then Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein had no other alternative but to proclaim a state of national disaster when large swaths of the federal capital, from Cheras in the south to Segambut in the north, were paralysed. Reports of key landmarks like Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad, the Supreme Court and St Mary's Church submerged up to their ornate arched doorways definitely brought painful memories the few, who were old enough to have witnessed the ravages of the great 1926 Kuala Lumpur flood. Even the Weld, Kuala Lumpur's first full-fledged supermarket, Jalan Ampang's AIA Building and Foch Avenue Bus Station were not spared this more modern time nature's wrath.

The ensuing mayhem was extensive. The widely used bus services were disrupted when rapidly rising waters made nearby roads resemble tiny tributaries of the muddy Sungai Klang that suddenly appeared like magic overnight. Most vehicles could only go as far as the Jalan Campbell (Jalan Dang Wangi) and Jalan Kamunting junction before they were abandoned.

At around the same time, Sungai Gombak began spilling over its banks near Segambut. Kuala Lumpur was practically cut in two as the flooded major thoroughfares effectively severed all possible road links.

Traffic snarls were the order of the day as Jalan Melaka, Jalan Ipoh, Jalan Yap Kwan Seng, Jalan Ampang, Jalan Maxwell (Jalan Tun Ismail), Jalan Raja and Jalan Mounbatten (Jalan Tun Perak) were under 1.5m of water and completely impassable to all vehicles. The already tumultuous situation was made worse after Jalan Damansara was cut off by a major landslide and swift currents led to the collapse of the Ampang Jaya Bridge.

In the midst of a dysfunctional traffic system, many motorists found it safest to park their vehicles on higher ground before continuing their journey on foot in the rain. Those who were trapped had to get their vehicles out of harm's way by forking out as much as RM10 to resourceful teenagers and young adults, who took full advantage of the dire situation to act as hired hands.

RELIEF EFFORTS

Burst pipelines, wayward floating debris and garbage threw other forms of communication with-



Residents explored the streets near the Central Market after the flood receded.



After the flood, people made a beeline for the financial institutions and shops around Medan Pasar.



Kuala Lumpur streets were deserted during the 1971 flood.

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in the town (Kuala Lumpur only acquired city status on Feb 1, 1972) into total disarray. Unrestored electricity supply cuts caused Radio Malaysia transmissions to go off the air at 8am on Jan 5, 1971. Services resumed later in the day on short wave after creative technicians successfully enabled connections with the Penang station via short wave. At the same time, scores of telecommunication officers scrambled to the aid of frantic subscribers who failed to contact their loved ones after thousands of telephones went out of service.

Mindful of general public distress, Abdul Razak ordered the immediate setting up of emergency headquarters at Parliament House to better coordinate rescue efforts between the military, police, goodwill committees and voluntary organisations. Much needed supplies were urgently channelled to relief centres like those at Stadium Negara, mosques, gurudwaras, temples as well as makeshift shelters at various organisations that commendably stepped up to aid a nation in need, including the *Straits Times* (*New Straits Times* today) which became temporary home

to 100 evacuees from nearby Kampung Paya.

At the forefront were police and army assault boats, which were met with tears of joy and sighs of relief in many flood-ridden areas, including Kampung Baru and Kampung Datuk Keramat, which were the hardest hit with almost three-quarters of the houses flooded to the roof. While on their way to relief centres, victims could only watch on helplessly as numerous current-battered wooden dwellings gave way and were swept away in front of their eyes.

More than 1,000 residents at Hock Aun Estate found themselves marooned after a section of Jalan Klang came under 2.4m of water. Huddled on rooftops and higher floors of taller buildings in the vicinity, their salvation came in the form of boats which were turned heroes after ferrying the victims to higher ground at the Jalan Kuchai Lama junction.

DANGER IN THE RIVER

Rescue operations were, however, punctuated by sobbing children and adults who, despite the

timely rescue, were heartbroken after having to abandon their beloved pet birds, dogs and cats under lightning quick evacuation measures.

Nevertheless, fear struck deep in the hearts of those living in close proximity to Jalan Klang and its surrounding areas when news spread of crocodiles on the loose. Instead of staying put and succumbing to hunger, all 65 reptiles belonging to a farm in Hock Aun Estate took advantage of the raising waters to abandon their pens after the owner and his family were evacuated. While 10 were caught by gallant youths who knocked them out with sticks, the authorities issued grave warning to the public as the remainder were believed to have sought refuge in Sungai Klang.

Despite the various dangerous situations, the authorities faced uphill battles in their endeavour to ensure public safety. Few stubborn villagers had to be forcibly evicted after failing to see the gravity of the situation and insisted on staying put in their already submerged homes. At the same time, the police, including those from the Field Force and Federal Reserve units, appealed

to curious onlookers to remain indoors as their presence not only endangered their own safety, but also severely hampered rescue efforts.

A poignant photograph in the collection showing the Central Market surrounded by people after flood waters began receding nudges memory to the sense of desperation overwhelming the people during those trying times. Vendors at this main Kuala Lumpur retail centre for fresh produce were forced to evacuate at the height of the deluge when waters reached chest high.

Unaffected markets in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, however, saw roaring business as the uncertain situation and limited fresh produce supplies prompted residents to turn out in force in a bid to fill their larders. Unfortunately, the scramble resulted in significant price increases and profiteering by unscrupulous vendors who were heartless enough to capitalise on public desperation.

BUILDING BACK BETTER

Light at the end of the proverbial tunnel came in the form of much welcomed sunshine after four continuous days of seemingly endless downpours. As evacuation centres began thinning out, people from all walks of life started venturing into the streets in droves to survey the damage to their beloved town. Despite the overwhelming sadness over the loss of lives and severe damage to property, many refused to throw in the towel. Instead, they steeled their resolve by coming together to build back better and propel Kuala Lumpur to even greater heights in the years ahead.

As the first week of January 1971 came to a close, shops began to see brisk business as residents embarked on the laborious cleaning up process. At the same time, anxious customers queued up outside financial institutions to inspect their safe deposit boxes as soon as vaults were pumped

dry.

It was a sight many would not forget for a long time as bank officers used electric stoves, hairdryers and even bonnets of cars parked under the hot sun to dry mountains of waterlogged files. Once inside, customers were once again taken aback to see typists busy ironing cheques in the same way clothes were treated at home!

Scores of children made a bee-line for the Lincoln Cultural Centre in Jalan Mountbatten after receiving news that 15,000 soaked and mud-spattered books were in the process of being discarded. Within just a few hours, these resourceful youngsters managed to render their new acquisitions useable again.

After setting aside those that caught their fancy, the kids earned quite a tidy sum selling the remainder to second-hand bookshop operators who clustered around Jalan Melaka.

While returning the precious photographs to their protective folder, it becomes obvious that early warning systems and mitigation schemes must be put in place quickly to prevent calamitous floods like the one seen of late from recurring. Effective solutions to this problem, together with other natural disasters that we face in today's world, are ever more pressing due to widespread awareness towards global warming and other climate change effects.

At the same time, it warms the heart to see many organisations answering the government's call to lend affected flood victims a much needed helping hand. Having said that, it is time for us to make a small contribution to Tabung Bencana NSTP-Media Prima by either depositing directly in Maybank account 5141-0532-0757 or mailing a personal cheque to Jabatan Komunikasi Strategik, Media Prima Berhad, Tingkat 4, Anjung Riong, Balai Berita, 31 Jalan Riong, 59100 Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur.



Pre-war shophouse residents used ladders to access the upper floor during the flood.