

# Memories of a tragedy

Residents of a fishing village in Johor remember a plane crash that took place near their homes in 1977.



A memorial, inscribed with the names of the 100 victims of the ill-fated MH653 flight in Johor Baru in 1977, can be found at Tanjung Kupang. — Photos: Filepics

“THE village shook.” That is how 83-year-old Muhammad Md Zain described the 1977 hijacking tragedy of Malaysia Airlines’ Flight MH653. He was among dozens of Kampung Ladang residents in Tanjung Kupang, Johor that witnessed the crash over four decades ago.

The Dec 4, 1977 tragedy claimed the lives of all on board – 93 passengers and seven crew members – and Muhammad said it had a huge effect on him.

More affectionately known as Pak Atan, he was a Public Works Department (PWD) staff back then, assigned to help collect body parts and wreckage of the plane, including that of the then PWD director-general, Datuk Mahfuz Khalid, who was also on board the ill-fated plane.

“There was no stench (of human corpses) on the first and second day, but (it became) terrible on the third. The water that stagnated in the wreckage of the plane was black,” he said.

Muhammad said that he and hundreds of paid volunteers worked every day to collect body parts, plane debris and documents at the site of the crash for three months, following the instructions of the authorities to clean up the scene of the tragedy.

“It was heartbreaking to see the victims’ next of kin crying and moaning at the site while identifying their families’ belongings. What I remember most was when Datin Halimah Abdul

Due to long-running bureaucracy, he said, the group finds it difficult to get government assistance or to hold ecotourism activities in the area.

“Licences for these fishermen are important. (If the issue is solved), these people will get living aid, oil subsidies and compensation from the government. This is what we are fighting for. If they are not given the licences, they will still go to sea. They are traditional fishermen and they can’t earn a livelihood any other way,” said Abdul Jalil.

Kampung Ladang Village Development and Security Committee (JPKK) chairman Abdullah Saidi Rahmat shared Abdul Jalil’s sentiments, explaining that fishermen’s licences are not for fishing only but for ecotourism activities as well.

“Ecotourism is not just about fishing, it has many offshoots such as taking tourists fishing, boat trips to the sea and unique attractions in the waters of Kampung Ladang and surrounding villages, such as Tanjung

when Datin Halimah Abdul Rahim, wife of the then Agriculture Minister Datuk Ali Ahmad, recognised one of her husband's shoes from among the pile of items found," said Pak Atan.

Asked about his feelings about being involved in the operation, in a tearful tone he replied: "It was mixed – sadness, but also a sense of pride to be part of the recovery team. The event was extraordinary, and we never expected it to happen in our village. It is still fresh in my memory."

A positive outcome from the tragedy was that various parties began to pay attention to the development of villages in the Mukim of Tanjung Kupang, which comes under the Johor Baru district.

Kampung Ladang headman Abdul Jalil Abd Majid said many "mega projects" and investments from the government and private

sector have been implemented in the constituency, thus improving the living standards of residents.

"In 1977, Kampung Ladang was not as developed as it is now. The roads were still not tarred, electricity and water supply were still not available. Because of the tragedy, many ministers and dignitaries came to this village.

"We started getting electricity, water and various facilities. If it hadn't been for the tragedy, these developments might not have taken place," he said.

He said since it made the news, many public and private investment companies explored the area which led to noted developments like Forest City, Tanjung Pelepas Port (PTP) and most recently, Sunway Iskandar and that the surrounding area is now almost semi-urban.

"People will remember that in Tanjung Kupang, there was a plane crash. It put Tanjung



A picture taken on Dec 4, 1977 of the crash site, with officials and members of the media inspecting the area.

Kupang on the world map," said Abdul Jalil.

On the current development of Kampung Ladang, he said plans to develop the fishing village as a potential ecotourism

centre must be continued.

For that purpose, he said the residents of Kampung Ladang wanted the problem of issuing licences to traditional fishermen there to be solved.

Kampung Ladang and surrounding villages, such as Tanjung Pelepas Port, Forest City, Puteri Harbour.

"If we have a licence, we can carry out activities. We have a product, a brand. the Johor Tourism Centre can include the location of our village as a tourist attraction. That is why we urge the authorities to improve facilities in this area, especially in the jetty area in Kampung Ladang Hujung. It has vast potential," said Abdullah Saidi.

He said these efforts have been ongoing but stalled after the change of government following the 14th General Election in May 2018.

Abdul Jalil added that his team planned to set up the Kampung Ladang Residents Cooperative to drive fishing and ecotourism activities in the village, besides providing knowledge and training, among others, in the aspect of entrepreneurship to the youths. – Bernama