

SET IN INK

TAHFIZ FIRE



LESLIE
ANDRES

History repeats itself because we fail to learn from the past

As we move on, we tend to let tragedies fall to the back of our mind

IT was almost 28 years ago to the day that the worst fire in the history of tahfiz schools in the country occurred.

In the early hours of Sept 22, 1989, a blaze that began in one hostel of Sekolah Agama Rakyat Tufiqiah Al-Khairiah Al-Halimiah in Kampung Padang Lumput in Yan, Kedah, quickly spread to seven others.

Twenty-seven girls aged between 13 and 18 were killed in the fire, shocking the entire nation.

Investigation into the fire, which was popularly known as *Pondok Pak Ya* among the students and locals, concluded that a candle – which had been used by some of the girls as a source of light for studying or reading, and was not put out – had toppled over, starting the blaze.

It was believed that the fire first began on one of the mattresses in the hostel. In fact, most of the victims were found still on their beds, their mattresses burnt out underneath them.

Questions were raised about the mattresses being used, that they were actually made of highly-flammable material.

Meanwhile, the remains of the victims were buried in a specially-prepared grave nearby, with a special marker.

The nation mourned their loss. The authorities investigated their deaths. Measures were taken, measures were proposed.

But while their families and friends would never forget them, the nation likely did.

Life moves on for all of us, including those who have lost loved ones, whether due to old age, disease or under horrific circumstances.

The memory of these 27 teenage girls stayed with their loved ones, surely. But still, life goes on. And for those of us not connected to them in any way, the loss of their lives was likely forgotten after a while.

Issues with tahfiz schools, especially those private schools not registered with the Education Ministry nor the various state Religious Departments or councils, crop up every now and then.

The government, particularly the ministry and these religious departments and councils, has been trying to get these schools registered and regulated.

But by and large, there has been resistance and the problems still exist.

It was not until a few days ago, when a fire broke out at another tahfiz school, this time in the federal capital in the pre-dawn hours of Thursday, that we suddenly remembered that inferno at *Pondok Pak Ya* in distant Yan.

This time, 21 students, some of whom had not even been in the world a decade, lost their lives, along with two of their teachers.

How the families of the victims must feel would be beyond anyone who has not suffered a similar tragedy.

Their sadness, despair and anger must be horrific.

And what of those who experienced the same things in Yan?

They must be reliving those gut-wrenching moments all over again, and likely cursing that the lessons of that tragedy had yet to be learnt.

Stories of what happened at the Darul Quran Ittifaqiyah tahfiz school in Jalan Keramat Ujung have slowly emerged.

This paper has learned that some element of foul play likely exists. But that is something best left to police and Fire and Rescue Department investigators to determine.

It is important, of course, to determine if there was arson in this case, so that the culprit or culprits can be brought to book.

But what is of equal importance is to determine if other things had caused the tragic loss of 23 lives.

>> Turn to Page 21

How the families of the victims must feel would be beyond anyone who has not suffered a similar tragedy. Their sadness, despair and anger must be horrific.