

Headline	No more hardship for Haj pilgrims with Muassasah system		
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No more hardship for Haj pilgrims with Muassasah system

MAKKAH: Tabung Haji's (TH) management of haj pilgrims has improved from year to year since it was established 50 years ago, said former Malaysian ambassador to Saudi Arabia Datuk Syed Omar Al Saggof who has witnessed the changes himself.

Recalling his teenage years in Makkah and Madinah during the 1960s, Syed Omar said pilgrims faced difficulties during TH's early years because they had to be independent when dealing with haj matters.

"I first came to Madinah in 1968 as a student and I saw how hard it was for pilgrims to perform the haj without the muassasah system," he recalled when met, here.

He said haj pilgrims were previously managed by haj sheikhs

or agents and he had the opportunity to assist pilgrims as a part-time sheikh assistant and translator in Makkah.

Syed Omar, who is also a former senior lecturer of Arabic Language Studies at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), said he got the part-time job during the haj season due to his proficiency in Arabic.

He said after sailing for almost a month, the pilgrims were welcomed by haj sheikhs who eagerly looked for the still sea-sick clients.

"Haj pilgrims in the past did not enjoy the facilities that are available now and they stayed in stone-and-mud houses in the hilly areas around Masjidil Haram (Grand Mosque)," he said.

Syed Omar said they also had to bring their own cooking uten-

sils including a stove and some pots, cococuts and dry food items as they needed to cook for themselves.

He said the food items in a special box called the "peti sahara" would be given to locals or Malaysian students as a gift before they left.

"Pilgrims then had to stay in the Holy Land for three months to wait for their turn to go home and did not have the luxury of contacting family members due to the lack of communication facilities.

"What was sad was that when the ship docked at Penang Port, family members waited with anticipation for their loved ones and if they didn't appear, it meant they had died," he said.

Syed Omar said those days, pilgrims also did not have access to currency exchange and medical facilities. - Bernama