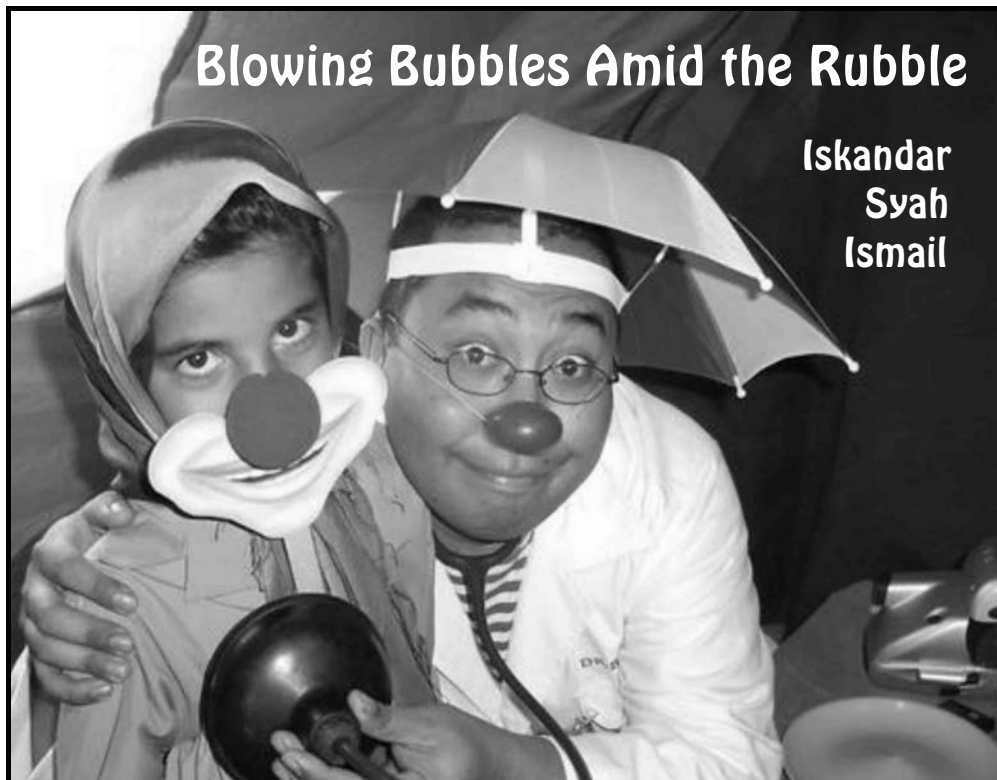


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Blowing Bubbles Amid the Rubble

Iskandar
Syah
Ismail

*Never mind the journey of a thousand miles
For the journey will be all worthwhile
In that joy of a little smile
And that of a little laughter
He did it with painstaking patience
Through all the worst wounds
And all the worst pains
And in the end
All smiles and laughter
Became cheap for here in this plain
Of driest misery
He is the best merchant of laughter
That one can ever hope for.*

From The Merchant of Laughter
by Al-Zamani Idrose written
for Iskandar *Dr. Bubbles*

Amongst the remains of the city of Bam, Iran, clowns help to heal the emotional wounds of its people.



**Situation: Bam, Iran
Some Background Information**

Along the Silk Road there is a town called Bam, in the Republic of Iran. Bam has been continuously inhabited for at least 2,200 years. By the 3rd Century AD, it was a flourishing marketplace. A great fort was built - Arg E Bam (Citadel of Bam) probably started 2500 years ago. The Citadel of Bam was the largest adobe building in the world. It had been, surrounded by moats, high walls and circular guard towers. In its long history, Bam must have been the scene of Zoroastrian rites, Buddhist missions, Nestorian Christians' proselytizing activity, and Manichean preaching. It was an historical treasure, for Iran and the world. Maybe 100,000 tourists, Iranian and foreign, visited Bam in 2003.

This is the Bam, Iran flattened in 18 seconds by a 6.6 earthquake on December 26, 2003 with 26,271 killed – crushed and buried under rubble. For perspective consider the statistics. Bam, before the earthquake, had a population of 142,376. The student mortality rate from the earthquake reported by the UN and Bam Education Office, being as followings (girls and boys): preschool - 232 students; elementary school - 3,216; junior high - 2,350; high school - 2,427; pre-college - 368; a total of 8,593 students dead in Bam and suburbs. 3,685 children lost both their parents, and 2,225 of these children are minors. Also, lost were 642 teachers.

Laughter Across Borders

Sixty countries offered some sort of aid. Two of the relief organizations (MERCY Malaysia (“MERCY”) and the International Blue Crescent Relief and Development Foundation (“IBC”) brought clowns for the children. But of course we clowns know that they were there for everyone, as it is with us in the hospitals. These two clowns many of us in the USA and England know from Clown Conventions and Clown Camp – Iskandar Syah Ismail, a.k.a. *Dr. Bubble*, and Sam Tee, a.k.a. *Uncle Buttons or Dr. Balloonie* both from Malaysia.

This is what they walked into: (From the International Blue Crescent Relief and Development Foundation)

“When you go in the camps established around the city of Bam, the first to welcome you to the site are certainly the children. Some of them extremely loud and naughty and some of them are just looking at you without words. They play in the dust and invent games using empty boxes.

“There are many children who suddenly and sadly found themselves in a totally strange environment, without their beloved around and forced to look straight in the cold eyes of the reality, getting from their rooms to an uncomfortable tent to be shared with many others, without mothers' hands

around or just a too sad mother herself needing a help hand out from all this.

“Due to the violent trauma they lived, there are children who refuse to talk or to smile and when you talk with them, they look at you and just do mechanically what they are told. They do not react to any game or any play the children are involved in. Neither the toys nor the colors do say much to them it seems... Sometimes, a doll or a teddy bear is held by a leg or just impersonally embraced, as a “memory” which lost its sense and is carried around the dusty roads of the camp...”

The photo on the left was taken while *Uncle Buttons* was entertaining in the neighborhood with balloons and tricks. He did this primarily to reach out to the families who were searching the remains of their homes. The photo below was taken at the tent camps of a “family” wearing red sponge noses from *The Hospital Clown Newsletter* delivered by the expert hands of *Dr. Bubbles*.

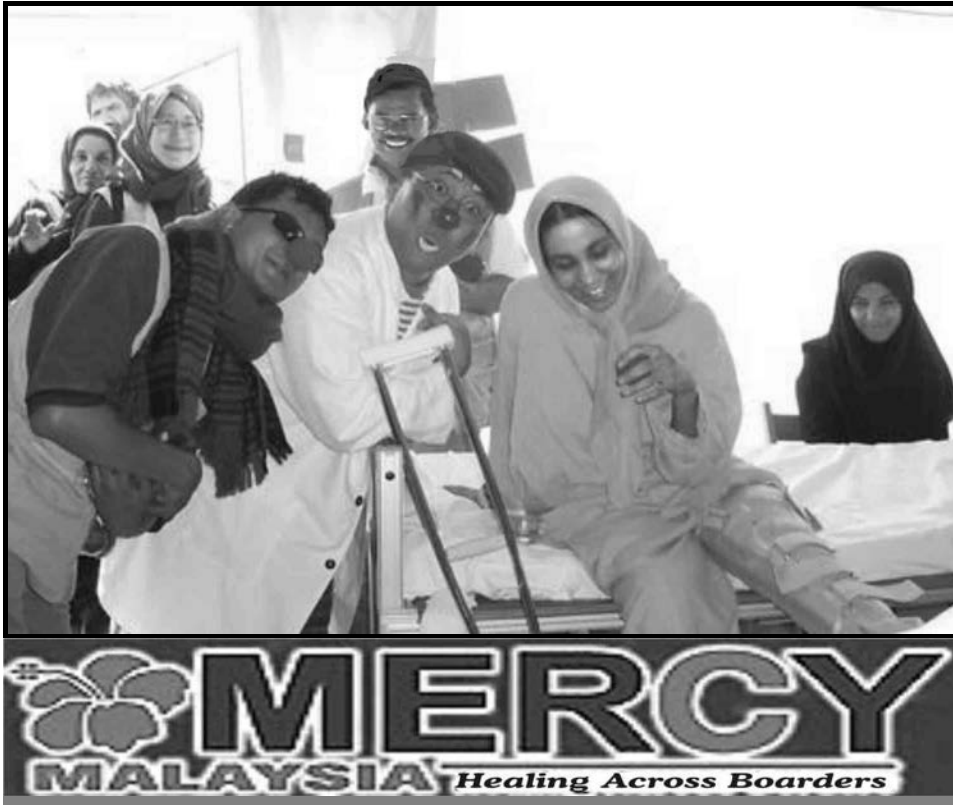
Iskandar went to Iran the end of January – a month after the earthquake and stayed for three weeks. Sam Tee went several weeks later so he was able to continue the clown ministry.

MERCY set up tent “cities” for living and clinical operations, while in the five Turkish container camps, IBC runs nine Children's Social Centers, being attended by approximate 2,000 children.

On the next page is a story written about Iskandar by a MERCY staff member.



Malaysian Clown in a Finnish Tent



By *Jemilah Mahmood* of *MERCY Malaysia*

Zahrah sits at the edge of her white framed bed. Her legs dangle aimlessly as she peers out of the opening of the white tent which had been home to her for the past six weeks. Her mind wanders to places which we cannot imagine and her eyes tell a story of pain and devastation. She asks about the Malaysian clown who had promised to return to see her. But for the moment, she has no reason to smile.

Iskandar "*Dr. Bubbles*" our MERCY volunteer clown and I arrived at the field hospital along with several other volunteers. I wanted to witness the work of a professional clown in healing patients. *Dr. Bubbles* tells us to wait a distance away from the tent. He is all dressed up with his huge shoes, red nose, make-up and face paint, baggy trousers complete with bright green suspenders, striped T-shirt and a white doctor's coat with DR. BUBBLES embroidered clearly above the left top pocket.

Dr. Bubbles blows bubbles through the little opening of the tent. The Iranians start to gather near the tent and soon we hear some

squeals of laughter from within. *Dr. Bubbles* had been discovered!

Zahrah lurched forward, her long neck straining to peer out of the tent and soon, a huge grin is evident on her face. She giggles and breaks into incoherent Farsi probably telling her "tent mates" about the return of her friend.

The Finnish nurse manning the tent guffaws and exclaims to *Dr. Bubbles* "She has been waiting for you to come. We all have!" It was obvious that not only the patients but also the medical staff at the field hospital needed some cheering up. The surgeon walks close to us and whispers to me to get the clown to motivate Zahrah to move her legs and her right hand. By that time, I had maneuvered my way into the background standing close enough to *Dr. Bubbles* and winding up his little music box to provide a continuous stream of "Frere Jacques," as *Dr. Bubbles* clowned around.

Zahrah is one of the many victims of a natural catastrophe that had claimed the lives of 42,000 unsuspecting Iranians as they lay asleep in the comfort of their beds on that very early morning of 26th December 2003 in Bam. Her house collapsed onto her family leaving only three survivors out of

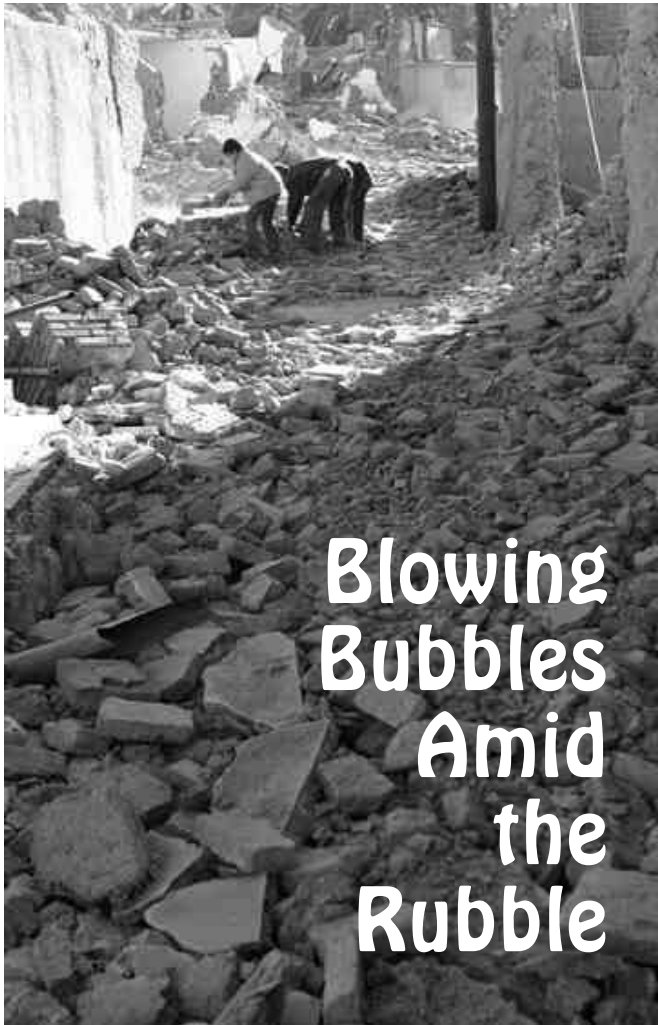
eight members. In the aftermath of the quake, she was found under a pile of rubble, her right thigh and shin bone badly broken. Her right wrist was smashed under a concrete block. Her hands hardly moved as I watched her and her wrist was floppy and weak.

Dr. Bubbles goes to her and *Dr. Zamani* entertains her with his hand puppets. The two men continue to dive into *Dr. Bubbles*'s bag coming up with all sorts of little clowning contraptions including a miniature violin and even a dead rubber chicken. The patients love them and the tent becomes noisy with laughter. *Dr. Bubbles* looked almost serious at one point as I reminded him about getting Zahrah to move her broken limbs.

Dr. Bubbles got into action and before long had managed to get Zahrah to lift up her right wrist to grasp a sponge nose that he held out to her. "Come and get it!" he teased as he coaxed her to flex her wrists and move her fingers. She managed to get hold of it and immediately placed it over her nose. I laughed as she posed in her bright red nose while *Dr. Bubbles* whipped out his Polaroid camera for a quick snapshot. He waved the picture to allow it to dry while again teasing Zahrah to move her legs before he gave her the picture. She frowned but we all cheered her on. Slowly, the right leg came to life and she managed to move it. She started swinging it back and forth like a pendulum that had suddenly been given the kiss of life and we all clapped. The photo was by then ready and she grasped it.

Dr. Bubbles smiles broadly and tells an interpreter to translate his words. "Tell her to promise me to keep moving her legs and wrist. I want her to walk out of this tent soon." Zahrah listened carefully to the interpreter and bowed her head. She then lifted up her chin and gave a big smile saying "InshaAllah" (God willing).

As I watched the love and interaction between *Dr. Bubbles* and Zahrah, I could not help but smile and cry at the same time. "This is MERCY Malaysia" I thought to myself. With God's blessings, we had come thus far to be able to touch the lives of people in need. People who felt no reason to go on living yet they had to. And it did not take a brilliant doctor or physiotherapist to help Zahrah. All it took was a Malaysian volunteer who became a clown.



Blowing Bubbles Amid the Rubble

by Iskardar Syah Ismail a.k.a. *Dr. Bubbles*

It was a pleasant surprise when MERCY Malaysia's President, Datuk Dr. Jemilah Mahmood, contacted me asking whether I would like to clown for the traumatized children in the earthquake hit city of Bam, Iran. All I could remember was that I just said YES immediately!

So within two weeks, I arrived in Bam with nine other fellow mission members including doctors, psychiatrist, dentist and non-medical volunteers of MERCY Malaysia.

We were stationed at the former Italian Field Hospital in Baravat, 5 km from the city of Bam. MERCY Malaysia volunteers lived in tents like the thousands of Bam survivors whose small white tents would be home for the next couple of months, surviving the cold desert nights and hot summer days.

During the four-week medical and laughter relief mission, I managed to clown in three major field hospitals in Bam. These included the International Committee of Red Cross Field Hospital, The Indian Army's Earthquake Relief Hospital in the center of Bam and our own MERCY Malaysia Field Clinic.

The hospitals were set up in tents and containers. My clown character, *Dr. Bubble* would enter the wards and blow soap bubbles with the children, checked happy heartbeats using his special sink-plunger stethoscope, performed red nose transplants to patients and snapped away photos using his Polaroid camera.

He even "bribed" the medical staff with a red nose, in order to gain access into the wards and performed the 'ultrasound scan' on male doctors' tummies to check whether they were pregnant or not (the scan only applied to male doctors!)



The medical volunteers of the MERCY Malaysia field clinic in Baravat camp were even sporting enough to give *Dr. Bubbles* his own consulting table during the clinic operational hours. In the clinic, *Dr. Bubbles* would perform artificial smile and red nose transplant operations and the plate"let" spinning test with the young patients who came to the clinic. (Child below spins a plate while he "checked.")



Being the only hospital clown doctor around in Bam, the demand for my service was very high. As I entered any field hospital, I would be whisked all over to see the patients in the wards. I had not only clowned with young patients but also adults.

There were so many magical incidences that happened during my clown-rounds and one wonderful incident is still fresh in my mind. As I was leaving the wards one day during a clown-round, the nurse called out to remind me that I had forgotten to visit one shy boy.

His name is Kanush. I found out later that he and his mother (who was now paralyzed as a result of injuries sustained during the earthquake) were the sole survivors in his family. I noticed him sitting quietly and withdrawn on his camp bed whenever I was clowning with other patients. However, my clown character *Dr. Bubbles* would not usually disturb a quiet and shy child, so I just continued to interact with others around him. Somehow, during the routine I totally forgot about little Kanush. So dutifully *Dr. Bubbles* returned and performed a red nose transplant on him and snapped some photos. Kanush remained quiet and shy, so *Dr. Bubbles* left him with a clown sticker and waved goodbye.



As I walked out to mingle with the doctors outside the tent wards, I realized Kanush (pictured above) had come along and stood among us. I lower myself to eye level with him and though a translator I asked Kanush for a goodbye kiss. Without hesitation, he kissed me! I felt like I was flying in the air! I was stunned and thrilled that shy little Kanush had opened up to me. Wow! That was such a special moment which will always remain in my heart.



On another clown round, I found a cute little girl just lying on the bed. A framed photograph clamped tightly to her chest. I could clearly see three children in the picture. She was not among them. As I approached, she broke into the sweetest smile I have ever seen.

“Who are they?” I asked softly. She just smiled. She didn’t understand my language. A translator came forward and told me that they were all her siblings. He added that her mother and siblings didn’t survive the earthquake. The little girl and her father are all that remained of the family. All she had was her father who would remain close to her at all times.

My clown character, *Dr. Bubbles* was a hospital clown doctor. He was basically trained to perform one-to-one interactions with bedridden patients. However, there were circumstances when he had to switch roles from a personal clown doctor to a stage clown or circus clown.

The Indian Army Hospital authorities were so impressed with *Dr. Bubbles*’s work in their hospital that they personally requested for a night performance to boost their soldiers’ morale while serving their country in a foreign land.

Thus, on the final night before leaving for Malaysia, *Dr. Bubbles* held a special performance for the Indian Army soldiers in their camp. The night was filled with songs, poems, laughter and smiles.

Dr. Bubbles was up to his usual tricks. He unsuccessfully tried to sell off his special ‘satellite’ dish and a packet of Made in India’s Instant Rassam Rice to the soldiers! The soldiers were even playful enough to participate in the comedy skits by *Dr. Bubbles*. For his special service, *Dr. Bubbles* was awarded the honorable rank as a ‘Colonel’ by the Indian Army Hospital Commander, Colonel Talan. What a special night indeed!



Being the ‘dalghaj’ (clown in Farsi), I was always swarmed by children in the camp asking for ‘bazi’ (or toys in Farsi) even when I was not in my clowning character or costume. I would always politely say NO to them. That was the first rule of clowning taught by my clown teacher, *Shobi Dobi*. “Be careful with giveaways and trinkets!” she said and this was reiterated by the famous doctor cum clown, the infamous Dr. Patch Adams. Doing so would make us vendors instead of giving them our clown-self.

I met Easer, a young Iranian boy in Bam. While the rest of the children would be asking for toys, Easer asked me for ‘bazi fikria’ instead. I could not understand this until Hashem our translator revealed the meaning of the words. ‘Bazi fikria’ literally translated meant ‘games or toys to think’. Immediately, I brought him to a quiet side of the camp and taught him and his friend how to do simple rope tricks taught by the famous Houdini. Through our translator Hashem, I told them “I will leave soon, but you can continue teaching others how to do it.” It was just a simple rope trick but it made me realize one thing: “If you give fish to people, it will feed them one day, teach them how to fish, and it will feed them forever.”



This is the proverb: "Give a man a fish, and he'll eat for a day; teach a man to fish, and he'll eat for a lifetime."

Sooooo

Clown for people, you make them laugh for a day, but
If you teach them how to clown, they will be able to laugh and spread laughter forever.



Finish volunteer getting the "treatment" from Dr. Bubbles.

There were moments when I just wanted to cry when I looked at the children in the wards, but I constantly reminded myself to stay in character and hold my emotions in check.

During the two-hour drive from Bam to the airport on our journey back to Malaysia, my team mate and resident poet Dr. Al-Zamani Idrose read his poem about me in the car. At that point, I could no longer contain the grieving of a clown and just cried. The poem evoked all the pent up feelings I had kept inside my heart during the clowning stints in Bam.

For a Little Smile and a Little Laughter

*by Al-Zamani Idrose
 for Iskandar Syah Ismail— **The Merchant of Laughter***

*Smiles and laughter
 are expensive
 here in this desert of driest misery
 They are indeed expensive commodities
 for whom hopes
 dried up to nothingness
 at the end of all these rubbles
 at the end of all these rumbles*

*Perhaps for far too long,
 they relented and surrendered
 to these deserts of driest misery
 and in the distance of those times
 they raised their price of smile
 to the highest skies,
 they raised their price of laughter
 to the loftiest stars,*

*Still,
 one soul cared to come
 with a red nose
 widest smile
 and largest shoes
 offering countless jokes
 extending numerous smiles,*

*Never mind the journey of a thousand miles
 for the journey will be all worthwhile
 in that joy of a little smile
 and that of a little laughter
 He did it with painstaking patience
 through all worst wounds
 and all worst pains
 And in the end
 all smiles and laughter
 became cheap for here in this plain
 of driest misery
 he is the best merchant of laughter
 that one can ever hope for.*

As I looked back, it was quite interesting to note that in the land famous for its literary figures like Rumi, Ferdowsi, Omar Khayyam and Saeedi; clowns are no strangers to the rich and varied Persian culture. In fact, I came to know about a famous clown or court jester named Karim-shire-ee, who belonged to the Qajar Dynasty hundred of years ago. 'Dalkhaj' or 'dalghaj' is the Farsi word for clown and it literally means 'sadness in happiness'.

In Dr Bubbles' case, I would rather see it as bringing 'happiness to the sadness'. All I can say is it has been a privilege, nay, an honor, to be a part of MERCY Malaysia's volunteer mission and to be able to bring back smiles and joy to the people of Bam.