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Azhar's ordeal began even before his trip

Ahmad A. Talib

WELCOME home Azhar! Oops, sorry. It's Datuk Azhar Mansor now. A sailor who left to venture into the open sea all alone only to return to a datukship months later is indeed rare. In fact, in recent times, Azhar looks like being the only one with this distinction.

In the old days of the Malacca Sultanate, the Sultan was known to have rewarded his officials who had performed exceedingly well for King and country with various titles and wealth. Often, warriors who had defended the country from foreign aggression or sailed abroad to seek wealth and territory were also similarly rewarded.

Hang Tuah became Laksamana Hang Tuah and so on and so forth. Neither Hang Tuah nor Azhar imagined that they would assume state titles upon their success. Both had undertaken their tasks seriously and sincerely and the thought of such recognition did not cross their minds, I'm sure.

For Azhar, his quest was to fulfil a dream which later turned out to be a national effort. When I first met him, he was on a fund-raising campaign, assisted by a few friends. Mior was one of them and the two met me several times to try to get this going.

But life is such. When Azhar went from office to office seeking funds, he was made to explain again and again the what, why, when and how of his dream. Seldom was there an immediate response: "Ok, what can we do to help? How much do you need?"

I first wrote about Azhar in this column on Nov 2, 1997. On that day I wrote that Azhar feared that his dream was fading away because he was having difficulties raising sufficient funds. At that point in time, he was RM1 million short of making the voyage.

RM1 million to raise in late 1997 was not easy since the currency crisis was beginning to be felt after its first attack in July that year. Others would probably have given up, especially when there was barely enough money to sustain daily needs.

Azhar did his own marketing. A few close friends stood by him. There were times when he had to walk for miles just to explain to potential sponsors his dream. The walking was not by choice, but rather by force. Some just listened and offered words of encouragement; a few did more than that.

With the help of some friends, I dragged Azhar to the maritime side of the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition at Porto Malai, Langkawi, in 1997 which later became his operations base. A few corporate people met him to discuss possible involvement. The keyword here is "discuss".

Azhar slept in a cabin on board one of the Star Cruise ships at the jetty. The cabin was one of two allotted to this newspaper by the maritime show organisers but we decided to give one to Azhar. It wasn't a big cabin, but it served Azhar's purpose then.

Azhar was never short of well-wishers. Among them was Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who started the donation rolling with RM50 from his wallet. Dr Mahathir initiated some moves to get sponsors interested in the attempt.

A well-connected politician promised to raise RM1 million when he learnt that Azhar's trip had the blessing of the highest office in the land. But this did not materialise. Instead, Azhar was made to redouble his efforts to raise funds, which he later did through the help of some well-wishers

who put their money where their mouth is.

Azhar may have sailed alone, but all Malaysians joined him in this endeavour that had made Panglima Hitam aka Henry the Black among the first to join Magellan in his world trip in 1522. Indeed, when Azhar sailed, he took with him the dreams and doa of millions of others who wanted to see him succeed.

Today, Datuk Azhar would have no difficulty in raising funds. Indeed, some may want to use him to seek funds. But the sailor is more wise now. I remember that a Menteri Besar whom Azhar had wanted to see to seek help before his trip could not even suggest a time for an appointment.

Months later, when it was obvious that Azhar was able to make the voyage, the Menteri Besar sought to see Azhar. But this time, Azhar could not find the time because he was already getting his boat ready. He had to leave without seeing the Menteri Besar.

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