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Feature-Treasure

SUNKEN PORTUGUESE SHIP WITH UNTOLD RICHES STILL REMAINS ELUSIVE

By Mohamad Bakri Darus

MELAKA: Visitors to Bandar Hilir Melaka will see a replica of a sunken Portuguese ship but many will not know why it is there or the role it had played in the Portuguese colonisation of Melaka.

The replica is that of "Flor De La Mar" meaning "Flower of the Sea" which sank in the Sea of Acheh, along with 100 tonnes of gold ingots, jewelry and other valuables said to be worth US\$100 billion or RM380 billion.

History says the treasure which is believed to be in the ship in its watery grave, were plundered from the people and treasury of the Melaka Sultanate by the Portuguese invaders when they conquered Melaka in 1511.

"The building of the replica had raised a controversy then, that is, why are we glorifying the Portuguese ship but to me, what I am glorifying is what is in the hold of that ship, that is, the rich history of the nation and the Malay civilization," said former Melaka chief minister Tan Sri Rahim Tamby Chik.

The landmark ship was built when Rahim was chief minister from 1982 to 1994, to spur the search for the ill-fated Portuguese galleon.

He said if the ship could be found, it would throw a different light on the history of Melaka which had all this while depended on the historical records of the Dutch and British, the two colonial powers which had ruled Melaka after the Portuguese.

FLOR DE LA MAR

Rahim said according to records written by Western scholars, the first thing the Portuguese invaders did after they conquered Melaka was to loot the fort and treasury of the Melaka Sultanate.

They issued the order that whoever was found keeping things of gold or silver, would be killed and so the people surrendered their

valuables of
gold, silver, diamonds and gemstones.

At that period, Melaka was the most famous trade centre in the East and was the largest Malay empire with a civilization noted for its trade, armed forces and propagation of Islam.

It was said that 20 to 30 chestful of gold and silver, two solid gold monkeys, diamonds and other valuables kept in the vault of the treasury were carted to the ship.

The overloaded ship was said to have sunk in the Sea of Acheh when it was hit by a storm while on its way back to the Portugal.

Along with the treasure were several beautiful Malay maidens who were to be brought back as gifts to the Portuguese king.

TREASURE STILL INTACT

It is believed that a good part of the treasure still remain in the ship in the watery grave, hidden by years of mud and corals.

Rahim who is also chairman of Vision Activators Foundation believed that the treasure in the hold of the ship is the essence of Malay civilization because they represent all the wealth, excellence, tools and valuable things gathered by the Portuguese conquerors.

"They can be used reference materials if we can recover a good portion of the wealth to write the history of the Malays at the zenith of the Melaka Sultanate," he said.

"Because the treasure is so valuable, the prime minister then, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, agreed that I, together with the then Foreign Minister, Tan Sri Abu Hassan Omar, meet President Suharto to discuss a Malaysia-Indonesia joint effort to search and recover the ship," he added.

After the discussion, Suharto agreed that a joint committee be set up to salvage the ship.

"I brought the good news to Dr Mahathir, and preparations were made to discuss and equip the search parties," he said.

Unfortunately, not long afterwards Malaysia was informed by Indonesia that the search was no longer in the ambit of cooperation because the presidential palace had issued the licence to search for the ship to

a
certain party in Indonesia.

"I received the news with sorrow, disappointment and frustration because the matter had been agreed upon but were told not to touch it again," he said.

Rahim said he learnt that the Indonesian side had engaged the services of an American company well-versed in searching for sunken ships but they also failed to find the Flor De La Mar though they detected 12 sunken ships in the sea concerned.

"If they were to continue with their search for Flor De La Mar, it would cost them US\$30 million, so nobody dares to continue with the search," he said.

RENEWING SEARCH

Rahim said he has recently renewed his effort to search and salvage the ship after meeting several members of the Archeology Association in Europe who are very experienced and who had produced several documentaries for TV like Discovery, on their success in finding sunken cities.

The group said they had adequate information to ascertain the location of Flor De La Mar in the Sea of Aceh because they had already done their research, Rahim said, adding that they also have the most sophisticated equipment to search for the treasure, even if these valuables were buried in layers of mud as in the Straits of Melaka.

"... with this, I am taking the initiative to re-kindle the interest of the people and nation to salvage the ship," said Rahim.

He had among other efforts written to the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in early May to seek his approval for a tripartite cooperative effort to locate and salvage the ship and provide proof of a great and mighty Malay civilization.

"I proposed to the Prime Minister that the Malaysian Government take the initiative to obtain the cooperation of the Indonesian Government and the Archeology Association in Europe to sign a tripartite agreement.

"The agreement will set the terms of reference, the principles of

salvage operation in terms of capital, the structure of the capital, the laws of Malaysia and Indonesia as well as maritime laws, the role of those providing the information, the rights of Melaka where the treasures were looted and so on," he added.

This pact would ensure that there not would be any dispute or misunderstanding when the treasures are recovered.

"For example, the Indonesian Government could provide the licence, the Malaysian Government some capital, and the European experts their information and technology to detect and recover the ship."

Rahim said in his letter, he also proposed that the Prime Minister appoint the Vision Activators Foundation as the coordinator of the project.

He also said the Portuguese Government had not indicated its interest in staking a claim on the sunken treasure.

If the treasure could be recovered, Rahim said the foundation would build a museum in the state called the Malay Sultanate Museum to house the fabulous riches of the bygone empire.

"It is meant not only for the people to see but also as reference materials for the future generations, open to scholars, historians, sociologists, anthropologists from all over the world to do their research on the glory and greatness of the Malay civilization before the fall of Melaka to the Portuguese in 1511," said Rahim.

-- BERNAMA

BD KGO