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Antarctica expedition will cover one-third of continent

PENANG, Mon. - The on-going scientific expedition to Antarctica, led by Universiti Sains Malaysia associate professor Dr Zulfigar Yasin, will cover about a third of the continent.

Zulfigar, who is leading a four-member team to the "White Continent", said although this was not the first Malaysian trip to Antarctica, it was the longest voyage and covered the greatest geographical area.

"Tropical scientists including Malaysians should be allowed to postulate new ideas and contribute to the history of mankind. I have no doubt they should be given the opportunity," Zulfigar said in an email to the university.

He thanked Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for encouraging research in Antarctica.

Zulfigar, 42, is joined on the expedition by planktonologist Wan Maznah Wan Omar and marine taxonomists Mahadi Mohamad and Sazlina Md Salleh.

They are among 50 scientists from Australia, New Zealand and Japan on board the Australian Antarctic Division's ice-breaker Aurora-Australis, which is equipped to withstand tidal waves.

The 10-week expedition began on Jan 3, and the ship is in the Southern Ocean, having crossed the Antarctic circle.

"Right now we are working with krill specialists from Japan and Australia to test, calibrate and sort out the scientific equipment," Zulfigar wrote to USM vice-chancellor Professor Dzulkifli Abdul Razak last week.

Krills are a shrimp-like organism and a source of protein.

The Malaysian team, he added, was dealing with the plankton, while the Canadian and German scientists were working on different aspects of ecology.

"The team is well and spirits are high," Zulfigar said.

Dzulkifli said the group would be involved in outdoor ecological studies into four specimens of krills.

He will fly to Australia at the end of March to welcome the group back.