

RM21 mil mansion: A gift to Taib's family?

Malaysiakini.com

August 26, 2010

Did logging giant Samling give a 100-year-old mansion in Seattle worth at least US\$6.8 million (RM21 million) to Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud's family?

That's the question asked by an anti-Abdul Taib website, Sarawak Report, in its latest series of explosive revelations.

The mansion was bought by California-based CSY Investments in 1991 through its subsidiary, WA Boylston Inc, and its ownership was allegedly transferred to Taib's family a few years later for a nominal sum of US\$1 (RM3.1).

According to Sarawak Report, CSY is the initials of CSY Investments president Chee Siew Yaw, who is son of Yaw Teck Seng, ranked by Forbes magazine as the 13th richest Malaysian along with eldest son, Yaw Chee Ming.

Teck Seng, 72, is founder of conglomerate Samling Global, which began its logging operation in the rainforests in Sarawak before moving overseas to Guyana, Russia and China.

Earlier this week, the Norwegian pension fund announced that it was divesting 16 million of its shares in Samling following the company's "unethical" operations in Sarawak and Guyana, which has contributed to illegal logging and severe environmental damage.

Taib defends Samling

Yesterday, Abdul Taib had defended Samling, describing it as a "responsible" company.

"Abdul Taib in his joint capacities as chief minister, finance minister and state planning and resources minister, has controlled the issuing of Sarawak's timber licences for the past 30 years, leaving clear questions over his incentives for favouring such an 'unethical' company," said Sarawak Report.

The two-storey mansion, originally built in 1910, sits on a gentle slope in the exclusive Boylston Avenue East neighbourhood, providing an excellent view of the Seattle skyline.

The building, which has six bathrooms and five bedrooms, has a full basement, a large patio, a built-in garage, a gazebo, a pond and a tennis court.

According to Sarawak Report, Taib acquired the sprawling mansion, whose compound is about half of a football field, in the mid-1990s.

"The property forms part of the family's Sakti International Corporation, incorporated in California and currently managed by Hisham (Sean) Murray, the chief minister's son-in-law," it said.

Murray is husband of Jamilah, the eldest of four siblings in the Taib family. The couple owns the second most expensive house in Ottawa, Canada, worth RM28.3 million.

The Yaws and the Taibs

It is earlier reported that Canadian-based Sakti International owns an estimated US\$80 million (RM258 million) in properties, including the Washington Fusion Centre - a maximum security building which houses the Seattle division of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and counter-terrorism unit.

The Sarawak Report said that the only official document on the transfer of the Seattle property was from the King County Land Registry in a quit-claim deed where CSY Investments gave up the mansion for US\$1.

A quit-claim deed is a document by which one disclaims any interest one may have in a piece of property and passes that claim to another person.

It sometimes used for transfers between family members, gifts, and the placing personal property into a business entity.

NONE“Family portraits of the chief minister, his deceased wife and four sons and daughters as small children, adorn the elaborate rooms,” said Sarawak Report.

The website also mentioned a second property, “an equally gracious and prestigious mansion” has also found its way from the Yaws to the Taibs in Seattle.

The house, worth about US\$2.85 million (RM9 million) at its peak value in 2008, has the “famously sought-after views over the city”.

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