

M'sian military: Years of living dangerously
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COMMENT In 2008, opposition figures pushed for an investigation into the procurement of 12 Eurocopter helicopters costing RM2.3 billion that they contend was conducted improperly. It is claimed that the Defence Ministry massively overpaid by more than RM1.4 billion when buying aircraft from Eurocopter for the Royal Malaysian Air Force.

helicopter military eurocopter cougar ec 725 troop transporterThe complaint claimed that Malaysia signed a letter of intent to acquire 12 Eurocopter EC725 Cougar helicopters for the sum of RM2.3 billion when Brazil paid only US\$1.2 billion for 50 units of the same model.

The questions Malaysians want answered are: Is the Malaysia government buying the best aircraft in terms of value for money? Was there a feasibility study conducted to compare prices and functionality of these copters? In the first place, why was there an issue with the proposed purchase that necessitated the Public Accounts Committee to conduct an investigation?

The year before that in late 2007, the auditor-general had tabled a report in Parliament alleging that a contract to build naval vessels given to PSC-Naval Dockyard, a subsidiary of Penang Shipbuilding & Construction Sdn Bhd, owned by Amin Shah Omar Shah was in serious trouble.

The Malaysian company was contracted to deliver six patrol boats for the Malaysian Navy in 2004 and complete delivery by April 2008. Those were supposed to be the first of 27 offshore vessels ultimately to cost RM24 billion. The contract included the right to maintain and repair all of the country's naval craft. However, only two barely operational patrol boats had been delivered by mid-2006.

malaysia military navy teluk sepanggar naval base sabah 030908 02There were 298 recorded complaints about the two boats, which were also found to have hundreds of uncompleted items. The original RM5.35 billion contract ballooned to RM6.75 billion by January 2007.

The auditor-general attributed the failure to serious financial mismanagement and technical incompetence stemming from the fact that PSC had never built anything but trawlers or police boats before being given the contract by then defence minister Najib Razak. The report had found the value of the contract should only have been RM4.9 billion and that two vessels delivered to date were both found to be defective.

Sub-standard equipment issued

Another scandal concerned not only the amount of money wasted on defective equipment but the fact that the Army actually allowed these products to be issued to soldiers.

military malaysia army tentera 131106 troop patrol Some 5,000 defective ballistic helmets were issued to soldiers even though the Army was aware of the helmets' weaknesses - its testing team had conducted tests on them and concluded that these helmets did not meet the armed forces requirements.

Instead of holding the contractor, Seri Mukali Sdn Bhd responsible and demanding redress, the Army issued them to its combat units. This amounted to criminal negligence and a dereliction of duty on the part of those responsible for making the decision.

A case in 2004 had an international dimension. US authorities arrested and charged Pakistani national Jilani Humayun for his alleged role in shipping contraband military goods to Malaysia, from where they were re-exported to Iran.

He was also charged with conspiracy to commit money-laundering and mail fraud. The sensitive dual-use hardware, which was funneled through an as yet unnamed Malaysian company, included parts for F-5 and F-14 fighter jets and Chinook helicopters.

There were also question marks surrounding the 2004 proliferation case involving Scomi, a company owned by then prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's son Kamaluddin, which was allegedly involved in supplying dual-use technology to Libya's clandestine nuclear-weapons programme. Buhary Syed Abu Tahir, a Sri Lankan national with Malaysian permanent residency, sat with Kamaluddin on the board of Scomi-linked company, Kaspadu.

Documents obtained by the Associated Press reveal that Buhary was the chief financial officer of Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan's underground nuclear-proliferation network. How he was able to forge such high-powered alliances with Malaysia's political elite is a question that remains unanswered.

Jets left to rot in the Californian desert

hawk 208 230605The choice of aircraft and other military equipment by the Malaysian Armed Forces has often baffled observers. The operational problems faced by the newly acquired Hawk fighters in 1996 – avionic components prone to breakdowns and spare parts slow in arriving – turned out to be because the Hawks used were new models!

The RMAF experienced a critical moment earlier in 1996 when almost all the Hawk advanced jet trainer squadrons were grounded because of components shortage. As a result of this problem, the RMAF was unable to meet its target of training sufficient numbers of pilots to fly the more sophisticated jet fighters like the MiG-29 Fulcrum and the F/A-18 Hornets.

The pilots need at least 1,000 flying hours on the Hawk or other fighter aircraft like the F-5E air defence jets before they can fly the Fulcrums or Hornets. By then, the maintenance cost of the aircrafts had gone up and the government had to foot the bill for the spare parts.

The case of the missing Skyhawks is even more remarkable. The Malaysian government had bought 88 Vietnam War-era A4 Skyhawks from the US for less than US\$1 million (US\$1=RM2.58) each in 1985. However, the cost of refurbishing the aircraft with new avionics, engines, and armaments ended up to be RM320 million.

Fifty-three of the aircrafts were taken out of the desert. Out of these, 40 were refurbished to be flown by the RMAF; 12 others were cannibalised for spare parts and one brought back for maintenance training. The balance (35 jets) was left in the California desert. They were never brought back but were placed under the management of a company in the US which paid the parking charges for years.

In November 1993, "the Defence Ministry invited local and international companies to bid for the airframes of 35 RMAF A4 Skyhawk fighter bombers mothballed in the United States."

From 2000 to 2003, RMAF decided to take back the aircrafts in order to sell them off, but discovered that we no longer legally owned the aircraft.

Choppers falling out of the sky

Besides having to pay for the exorbitant military budget through the years, the human casualties and the loss of these very expensive aircraft is not acceptable.

Apart from the tragic loss of lives of our servicemen and women, one wonders if we have been short changed by the arms suppliers or if there has been compromises on the price, quality of the equipment or even if we have adequately trained personnel to fly these ultra-modern, high-tech jet fighters.

And of course, the quality of management and system of accountability have been called into question often enough in the armed forces.

From 1968 to 1997, the crashes of Sikorsky Nuri helicopters had claimed 73 lives in all.

nuri transport military helicopter Defence Minister Syed Hamid Albar, who was in the United States at the time, said there was no plan to retire the Nuris; instead, the remaining Sikorsky 61A-4 Nuris would be upgraded to extend their life span. They had been in service for 22 to 30 years up until 1997.

From 1970 to 1995, there were four De Havilland Caribou aircraft crashes killing at least 17 servicemen. Then there was the crash of the Super Puma helicopter in January 1994 in which four crew members lost their lives.

The Super Puma was on its way to fetch then deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim and his delegation in Kangar when it crashed. It was the 15th crash involving aircraft of the Royal Malaysian Air Force since 1990 – five involved the Pilatus PC-7 basic training aircraft; four were A-4PTM Skyhawk fighter bombers.

The other incidents included the Alouette III helicopter, the Cessna 402 aircraft, a Nuri helicopter and Hercules C-130 transport aircraft. It was remarked that we have lost more aircraft and pilots through accidents than through war combat.

Fifteen years later, the loss of two jet engines does not say much about the culture of maintenance or accountability at the RMAF. Nor does it say much about the role of the mainstream press in Malaysia in reporting and pursuing these vital questions involving the purchase and maintenance of Malaysia's military equipment.

The RMAF still had its Italian-made Agusta A-109C and Sikorsky AS61-N1 helicopters for VIP transport. But instead of tightening up and solving these shortcomings after each aircraft crash, it has only given the Defence Ministry an excuse to buy more and more expensive aircraft as replacements.

After the spate of crashes involving the rather expensive Hawks in 1996, a comment by the Air Force Chief Lt Jen Abdul Ghani Aziz was a giveaway – he grumbled aloud that simulator training was necessary to prevent accidents; it would help prepare pilots to cope with emergencies.

However, this suggestion was quickly shot down by then defence minister Syed Hamid, who said the government would not be buying simulators before acquiring new aircraft for the

Air Force because the cost of this equipment was too high.

We thus have a Catch-22 situation of our armed forces wanting the latest expensive military toys but not being able to afford the necessary accessories which can help to prevent wastage and tragedies.

Spending not subject for discussion

There is no doubt that ever since the Malaysian peoples' 'political tsunami' of March 8, 2008, the BN government has been forced to be more circumspect about authorising any big defence procurements for fear of losing electoral support.

malaysia army 160806 battalion For instance, the government was forced to stall the planned purchase of the Eurocopter EC 725 helicopters. Nevertheless, this has not stopped the same BN government from allocating a record RM23 billion, or 10 percent, of the total development allocation under the Tenth Malaysia Plan for defence and security.

It is clear that the government could get away with such huge defence budgets during the last few decades because of the erosion of these safeguards in our democratic system, viz. dominance of the executive over parliament; loss of public accountability; absence of Freedom of Information legislation; inadequate separation of powers between the executive and the judiciary; poor safeguards for civil rights.

The defence minister has recently reiterated that "security and defence matters are not subjects for discussion."

Nevertheless, it is important that while Pakatan Rakyat highlights the corruption involved in arms procurements by the BN, they also present their alternative defence policy to the rakyat at the next general elections.

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