

Silent figures in PKFZ scandal equally at fault, says ex-PKA boss
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, April 14 — The Port Klang Free Zone (PKFZ) project would not have racked up the hefty estimated RM12.5 billion bill if those in the know had broken their silence on the scandal years ago, Datuk Lee Hwa Beng (picture) has said.

The former Port Klang Authority (PKA) chairman said these individuals were just as responsible as those who had committed legal wrong in the project that has seen two former transport ministers put on trial.

“When you are given responsibility, even when you are not involved in wrongdoing, you cannot be silent. It is your duty to tell. The whole episode happened because people knew but kept silent. Silence in the face of evil is also evil,” he said in a recent interview with The Malaysian Insider.

“If anyone had squealed in the past 12 years, things would be very different and it would not have snowballed into such an amount.

“If only one person raised the alarm... but nobody did,” he added.

The project, initially estimated at RM1.1 billion after it was mooted by then Transport Minister Tun Ling Liong Sik in 1997, more than quadrupled to RM4.6 billion by 2007.

A position review by top accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) revealed in 2009 that the total cost including interests from debt repayments could reach RM12.5 billion.

Since December 2009, six individuals have been charged in court including Ling, an ex-MCA president, and his successor as transport minister, former MCA deputy chief Tan Sri Chan Kong Choy, who are accused of lying to the Cabinet.

Lee added that the duty to blow the whistle applied to every GLC and government body as they have public figures sitting on their boards as trustees for stakeholders they represented just as PKA had representatives from the prime minister’s department, finance and transport ministry as well as independent directors.

“It is the same with Sime Darby. So many Tan Sris who didn’t say anything about the losses.

“Why Malaysia Airlines (MAS) loss so much money? You cannot blame Tajuddin alone or the current boss. So many public figures there but what are they doing?” he said, referring to Tan Sri Tajuddin Ramli who was executive chairman of the flag carrier between 1994 to 2001.

Agreeing that PKFZ is “the biggest scandal in Malaysian history,” Lee, said that his three

years as PKA chief "was very lonely" especially after Datuk Seri Ong Tee Keat, who helmed the transport ministry when the position review was ordered, was removed as a result of losing the MCA presidency in 2010.

"The board members may agree with me but not openly support me. When Ong was removed and a new minister came in, board members and staff were no longer supporting me," he said.

He added that as his tenure drew to a close in March 2011, his subordinates treated him "like a lame duck."

In the book, Lee writes of how only one out of six other board members supported his proposal that PKA sue former directors for failing to oversee the project properly.

He wrote that he had raised this in his final board meeting on March 22, 2011, as the matter had been repeatedly postponed since November 2010 despite an internal task force led by top legal firm Skrine recommending action.

"The Transport Ministry even had time to seek a second opinion. Their lawyer, Shafee & Co, confirmed the advice given by Skrine," he wrote, referring to the firm headed by Datuk Seri Shafee Abdullah, one of Umno's top legal advisors.

"From my experience in government, if you talk too much, you won't be reappointed. It's a culture of yes-men.

"Those who make noise will be dropped immediately even in the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission advisory board. You talk, you drop," he said, referring to Tan Sri Robert Phang and Ramon Navaratnam who have both quit the panel since early last year.

The former Subang Jaya assemblyman will release his book, PKFZ: A Nation's Trust Betrayed on Tuesday, with hopes that it will "inform the public and such scandals will not happen again."

His co-author, former NST and The Edge journalist Lee Siew Lian said she agreed to help write the book as she "respects what Datuk had done... this is my contribution to support him."

"Silence is too easy a choice for too many people. But the fact that two former Cabinet ministers are being prosecuted tells you how big this thing is," she said.

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