SPECIAL
REPORT

ANTARCTICA: MALAYSIA AND THE RECENT PRIME MINISTERIAL EXPEDITION

by

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Introduction

The Malaysian Prime Minister Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad led a Malaysian expedition to Antarctica from February 6-13, 2002, twenty years after Malaysia had raised the issue of Antarctica at the United Nations (UN). He indeed became the first Malaysian Prime Minister, as well as one of the few Heads of Government to visit this continent. In one of his early decisions as Prime Minister, Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad instructed Wisma Putra in 1981 to raise the issue of Antarctica at the United Nations to ensure that it became the common heritage of mankind. The Malaysian Prime Minister in his speech at the 37th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on 29th September 1982, referred among others, to the issue of Antarctica and explained as to why the United Nations had to be directly involved with this issue.

“There remain certain areas in the world which are not covered by any international agreement. According to present norms, territories colonized by the old colonial powers must be decolonized, i.e. returned to the natives or the original inhabitants. The United Nations concern with this issue is reflected in the Permanent Committee on Decolonisation. However, there are still land areas, which have neither natives nor settlers. There is, therefore, no one to inherit the land and to set up viable governments, should the claims of the metropolitan

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powers be given up. Because of this, little attention has been paid to these areas.

It is now time that the United Nations focus its attention on these areas, the largest of which is the continent of Antarctica. A number of countries have in the past sent expeditions, which have not limited themselves to mere scientific exploration, but have gone on to claim huge wedges of Antarctica for their countries. These countries are not depriving any natives of their lands. They are therefore, not required to decolonize. But the fact still remains that these uninhabited lands do not legally belong to the discoverers in as much as the colonial territories do not belong to the colonial powers.

Like the seas and the sea-beds, these uninhabited lands belong to the international community. The countries presently claiming them must give up so that either the United Nations administer these lands or the present occupants act as trustees for the nations of the world.

Presently, exploitation of the resources in the Antarctica is too costly and the technology is not yet available. But no doubt, the day will come when Antarctica can provide the world with food and other resources for its development. It is only right that such exploitation should benefit the poor nations as much as the rich.

Now that we have reached agreement on the Law of the Sea, the United Nations must convene a meeting in order to define the problem of uninhabited lands, whether claimed or unclaimed, and to determine the rights of all nations to these lands. We are aware of the Treaty of Antarctica concluded by a few nations, which provides for their co-operation for scientific research and prohibits non-peaceful activities. While there is some merit in this Treaty, it is nevertheless an agreement between a select group of countries and does not reflect the true feelings of members of the United Nations or their just claims. A new international agreement is required so that historical episodes are not made into facts to substantiate claims.”

Following this speech and countless lobbying efforts, including various meetings, an item entitled “The Question of Antarctica” was included for the first time in the agenda of the Thirty Eight Session of the UN General Assembly at New York. The first debate on this item began on 28 November 1983 in the First Committee of the UN General Assembly, more than 14 months after the Prime Minister’s first reference to Antarctica at the UN on 29 September 1982.

Why Antarctica?

In a letter dated 11 August 1983 and addressed to the UN General Assembly to include a supplementary item in the Agenda of the 38th Session of the
UN General Assembly, the Charge d'Affaires of Malaysia to the UN, Mr. A.W. Omardin and the Permanent Representative of Antigua and Barbuda Mr. Lloydaton Jacobs, representing number of like-minded developing countries, explained the importance of Antarctica and its relevance to the United Nations. The letter, interalia, stated:

"Antarctica constitutes approximately 8.9 per cent of the earth's land surface, covering six million square miles of land mass, ice and waters. It is the last undeveloped continent, unsettled with no original inhabitants. It lies in unique isolation in a triangle formed by the geographical extension of the southern most part of South America, Africa, Asia and Australia. Surrounded by the three largest oceans - the Pacific, Indian and the Atlantic, the continent was "according to Rarotogan legends" first discovered by a Polynesian, Ui-te-Rangoria, around A.D. 650.

Early interest on Antarctica was mainly for frontier claims and colonization through discovery, occupation and propinquity. Later, scientific and environmental co-operation was initiated, leading to the signing in 1959 of the Antarctic Treaty, which attempts to manage the conflicting territorial claims on the continent and to promote other objectives such as seeking to guarantee that Antarctica, in the interest of science and progress of all mankind, be used exclusively for peaceful purposes and not become the scene or object of international discord.

Antarctica is of considerable environmental, climatic and scientific significance to the world. This has prompted scientists of various disciplines and from many nations within the framework of the Antarctic Treaty to collaborate and carry out important studies and research, inter alia, in magnetic fields, weather systems distribution of earthquakes, effects of solar flares and the preservation of whales, seals and marine living resources, with the view to promoting international co-operation in environmental conservation and preservation of the world's ecosystem. Antarctica could also have considerable economic potential in harvesting of living and non-living resources.

Despite the progress made in these collaborative scientific efforts, there is need to examine the possibility for a more positive and wider international concert through a truly universal framework of international co-operation through the United Nations, to ensure that activities carried out in Antarctica are for the benefit and in the interest of mankind as a whole."

Thus began an international challenge at the UN to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty over the future of Antarctica for the benefit of mankind. The signatories to the Treaty, led by the Antarctica Treaty Consultative Parties (ATCP) maintained that the Treaty remained valid, insisting that it should be retained
outside the ambit and purview of the United Nations. The ATCP which enjoyed full membership as opposed to the limited membership of non-consultative Parties, emphasized that the Treaty was open to all countries and those seeking consultative status could achieve it by:

"demonstrate its interest in Antarctica by conducting substantial scientific research activity there, such as the establishment of a scientific station or the dispatch of a scientific mission." 3

Following the debate at the First Committee of the UN General Assembly in 1983, Malaysia and its supporters tabled a Resolution on the Question of Antarctica which, interalia, called for the establishment of Antarctica as a common heritage of mankind under the jurisdiction of the United Nations in place of the existing exclusive Antarctic Treaty System (ATS). The "Question of Antarctica" remains to this day as an agenda of the United Nations, with Malaysia initiating a draft General Assembly resolution on Antarctica and supported by a large number of the developing countries. At the 48th session of the General Assembly in 1993, for the first time since the Antarctica issue was raised, the draft resolution was adopted by consensus on the basis of the Chairman's text, rather than a text initiated by Malaysia, reflecting greater understanding and cooperation between the co-sponsors of the resolution and the members of the ATCP that had earlier opposed the Malaysia-initiated resolution.

At the 54th session of the General Assembly, as further demonstration of greater cooperation between the two sides, delegates to the First Committee agreed that the Question of Antarctica be considered on a triennial basis rather than annually. Malaysia, along with the other co-sponsors of the Antarctica resolution, had agreed to the triennial arrangement on account of the fact that through our efforts at the United Nations there was greater transparency and accountability on the part of the ATCP countries. While the UN Secretary-General himself had not been invited to attend the consultative meetings of the ATCP - as Malaysia had called for - the Executive Director of UN Environment Programme had been invited to attend these meetings and had provided useful information pertaining to these meetings and other relevant information on Antarctica to the UN Secretary-General, thereby greatly assisting him in the preparation of his annual report to the General Assembly on the subject. At the same time Malaysia was mindful of the declining interest showed by its traditional co-sponsors and supporters, as evidenced by the decreasing number of delegations taking part in the debate on the subject. In recent years the debates on Antarctica in the First Committee had been characterized by greater understanding and convergence of views than the confrontation of past years and this had an impact on the attitudes of delegations.

While the Malaysian UN initiative contributed towards international awareness of the vital importance of Antarctica to the world's climate, environment and security, it made limited headway in providing an alternative to the Antarctic Treaty itself. The ATCP countries were formidable in their
opposition and strenuously lobbied other countries, especially developing countries and those in the then Soviet bloc. Prominent developing countries such as India and China acceded to ATCP status while other developing countries were diverted due to other pressing issues. The struggle by Malaysia and its friends to promote and protect the Antarctic environment was a principal factor which galvanized international public opinion against the attempt at mineral exploitation by some ATCP in Antarctica, which many feared would cause irrevocable damage to the fragile Antarctic ecosystem. Faced with the international outcry, including in their own countries, the ATCP countries agreed to a 50-year moratorium beginning in 1992 against mineral exploitation.

Direct Involvement in the Continent

Aside from raising the issue of Antarctica at the UN and other fora, Malaysian officials undertook visits to the continent. The first Malaysian to visit Antarctica was by the Director General of the Department of Chemistry Mr. Amarasingam followed by Ambassador Tan Sri Zain Azraai who was then Malaysia’s Permanent Representative to the UN. He was accompanied by the Science Advisor to the Prime Minister Professor Dr. Omar bin Abdul Rahman. Subsequently, Dr. Ling Liong Sik the Minister of Transport became the first cabinet Minister to visit the Antarctica in a visit organized by New Zealand.

13. These series of high level visits over the years facilitated the recent visits of Malaysian scientists to the Antarctica. To sustain Malaysia’s scientific interest and involvement in Antarctica, the Malaysian Academy of Science established a Task Force on Antarctica. Over the last four years, Malaysian scientists had undertaken studies relating to atmospheric science, micro organisms and radio communications.

The Prime Ministerial Expedition, February 6-13, 2002

Against this backdrop, the Prime Minister who had initiated Malaysia’s involvement in Antarctica two decades ago led an expedition by ship to the continent from February 6-13, 2002. The Prime Minister was accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Dr. Siti Hasmah Haji Mohd Ali, Minister of Defence Dato’ Sri Mohd Najib Tun Hj. Abdul Razak, his wife Toh Puan Indera Datin Sri Rosmah Mansor, the Minister of Science, Technology and the Environment Datuk Law Hieng Ding, his wife Datin Ngui Soon Leng, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and his wife Datin Seri Sharifah Aziah Syed Zainal Abidin.

The 60-ought member delegation also included the Secretary General to the Foreign Ministry Dato’ Ahmad Fuzi Hj. Abdul Razak, the Malaysian Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York Ambassador Hasmy Agam, the Malaysian Ambassador to Argentina, Ambassador Dato’ Santhanananban, the Undersecretary for American Affairs at the Foreign
Ministry Ambassador S. Thanarajasingam, Mr. Mohamed Elias Abu Bakar, the Deputy Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, the Science Advisor to the Prime Minister Tan Sri Datuk Dr. Ahmad Zaharudin Idrus and four Malaysian scientists. Other notables included business tycoons Mr. Ananda Krishnan and Tan Sri Arumugam, both of whom were instrumental in organizing the expedition. The Editor-in-Chief of The New Straits Times, Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad and his wife were also part of the expedition.

The expedition began on the morning of February 6, 2002 as the Russian icebreaker ship “KAPITAN DRANITSYN” left the Argentine port of Ushuaia, which prides and promotes itself as the southernmost city in the world. The ship, which could accommodate 100 passengers, included a crew of 90 consisting of 75 Russians while the rest were guides, who gave lectures on board and were the tour guides at the landings in various parts of Antarctica. “KAPITAN DRANITSYN” came fitted with two helicopters and 4 motorised dinghies. It took two days of sailing nearly 1000 nautical miles across the rough Southern Seas through the Beagle Channel and the Drake Passage before the ship reached the peninsula of Antarctica. At Antarctica, the members of the expedition visited Paradise Bay, Neko Harbour, Lemaire Channel, Penola Strait, Pleneau and Cuverville Island. The expedition members were mesmerized by the pristine beauty of the ice and snow-clad continent. The wild life - the penguins, seals, whales, and birds, fascinated the Malaysians. After 4 days at Antarctica, the expedition left for Ushuaia through Cape Horn, on a memorable two-day return journey marked by strong winds which made the ship tilt 45%, wild 8-storey high waves and with very few, having escaped motion sickness.

THE NEXT STEP

The Question of Antarctica will be coming for debate again this year at the upcoming 57th session of the General Assembly. Following the Malaysian Expedition to Antarctica, led by the Prime Minister and taking into cognizance the increasing involvement of Malaysian scientists in Antarctic research, Malaysia would have to formulate an appropriate position that would strike a balance between its diplomatic position of championing Antarctica as a common heritage of mankind and its continuing conduct of scientific research on the continent with the cooperation of the ATCP countries, particularly New Zealand, which has been assisting Malaysia over the past few years.

END-NOTES

1 Speech by the Malaysian Prime Minister at the 37th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York on 29 September 1982


3 Article IX.2 of the Antarctic Treaty, Washington 1st December 1959 (Entry in Force 23 June 1961)