

Headline **Evacuation operation a baptism of fire!**  
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# Evacuation operation a baptism of fire!

**CAIRO:** The successful evacuation of more than 8,000 Malaysian students from Egypt recently under Ops Pyramid has certainly put to test the ability of the various agencies in successfully coordinating a rescue mission faraway.

While naysayers rubbished the whole 'ops pyramid' exercise as nothing but a ploy by the current administration to seek political mileage, the truth remains that Malaysia has the ability and assets to undertake missions to rescue its citizens in foreign land.

The Egypt episode came on the heels of another successful mission overseas when the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) commandos stormed a hijacked Malaysian chemical tanker at the Gulf of Eden and rescued its 23 crew from Somali pirates.

Seven of the pirates were taken back to Malaysia to be prosecuted.

However, unlike in the Gulf of Eden where it was a military exercise, in Egypt it was a humanitarian exercise involving greater number of people and numerous parties and third countries.

Egypt descended into turmoil in early February when its people rallied in major cities of the country - Cairo, Luxor, Alexandria - seeking to ouster President Hosni Mubarak whose three decades of rule is blamed for the country's economic and social woes.

Law and order broke down and foreigners in the country, including more than 11,000 Malaysian students, feared for their

lives.

When the Mubarak's regime tried to quell the uprising by shutting down Internet and telecommunication lines, the Malaysian students had no way to communicate back home.

As the situation deteriorated, their parents became worried and requested the government to help evacuate their children from the country that is the home of the great pyramids and the legacy of the pharaohs.

On Feb 1, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak decided the situation warrants an immediate evacuation after receiving the feedback from an advance party in Cairo headed by Deputy Foreign Minister A. Kohilan Pillay.

Thus the biggest evacuation exercise undertaken by Malaysia in a foreign land was set in motion.

The exercise that was later named 'Ops Pyramid' roped in the expertise and assets of the National Security Council (NSC), RMN, Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF), 1Malaysia Putera Club, Lembaga Tabung Haji, and airlines - AirAsia and Malaysia Airlines (MAS).

As time is essence in the evacuation process, the use of aircraft to bring out the students to a transit point in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia or directly back home was naturally the option.

The operation that started on Feb 2 initially involved two C-130s belonging to RMAF but looking at the big number of students involved and the uncertainty in Cairo, AirAsia and MAS were also enlisted to speed up the evacuation before

the condition in Egypt deteriorated further.

As a friendly gesture the Saudi government realising Malaysia's sense of urgency contributed the services of two Saudi Airlines' Boeing 747 to bring the students home.

The Bunga Mas 5, the same container vessel saved from the Somalian pirates in the Gulf of Aden was also routed to Adabiya Port in south of Cairo to standby in a worst case scenario. Luckily the flights provided by the aircraft were adequate and the last batch was flown home on Feb 7.

The advance party that virtually put up at the Cairo airport also played an important role in getting the landing rights for the Malaysian planes and organise the departure of the students.

As for all those involved in the operations it was a baptism of fire and an honour to serve the country in time of need.

Deputy Chief Executive Officer AirAsia Bhd Datuk Kamarudin Meranun told Bernama it was an honour to participate in the evacuation exercise.

"It is definitely a great sense of honour for us, especially when a civilian airlines given the opportunity to participate in the exercise, we are grateful for the recognition.

"It is not something that has been pre-planned, we gave our commitment immediately when the government requested for our assistance," he said.

Meanwhile, the Lembaga Tabung Haji (TH) also played an important role as its facilities in Jeddah were used to accommodate the students who were in transit

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there.

Its CEO Haji Datuk Ismee Ismail related to Bernama that Tabung Haji contributed its expertise in managing the pilgrims in ensuring the success of the evacuation.

“It was not difficult for us to manage the students in Jeddah as we have managed bigger number of pilgrims from Malaysia there,” he said.

Tabung Haji sent seven of its staff from Kuala Lumpur to assist its officers based in Jeddah.

“We even recalled our officers in Jeddah who were on leave to help manage the students,” he said.

The Foreign Ministry operated a 24 hour operations room in Wisma Putra to monitor the conditions in Egypt and the status of the Malaysian students.

Students could call the operations room to inform of their status and parents too could call to ask on their children’s status.

Meanwhile, the National Security Council’s secretary Datuk Mohamaed Thajudeen

Abdul Wahab said the council established safe zones in Egypt for the Malaysian students to start the evacuation process.

The council also ordered the evacuation process to be carried out around the clock to meet the deadline, especially when looking at the delays.

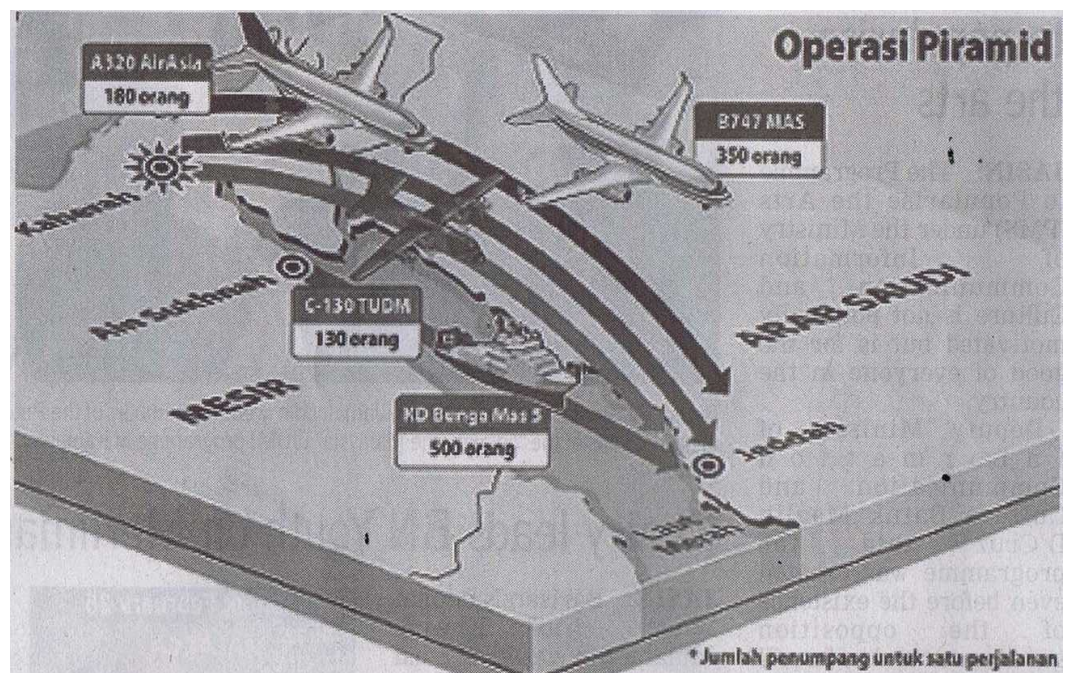
Even the 1Malaysia Putera Club did lend a helping hand in providing food for the hungry students and prepare the student manifest to facilitate their exit from the nation.

The club’s president Datuk Abdul Azeez Abdul Rahim noted that though it was no easy task in a chaotic atmosphere, we still managed it.

“Thank god at last we successfully completed the mission despite the initial difficulties.

“The cooperation of all parties helped to surmount the problems,” he said.

Yet, there were some individuals who came on their own and even risked their lives to help fellow Malaysians trapped in a country seeking a new destiny. — Bernama





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THANK YOU: Najib (centre) receives an appreciation memorandum from Dr Maamor (fifth left). — Bernama Photo