



## KLIA halts as a sign of respect

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7 September 2014

Having recently been in Malaysia, specifically Penang Island, I was able to witness the televised return of the remains of the first 20 Malaysians killed in the downed Malaysia Airlines (MAS) flight MH17 on 17 July. The repatriation ceremony was broadcast live on Friday 22 August, a day of national mourning and well covered in the press the following day. I was able to observe the sombre and emotional proceedings carried out with great respect and military precision throughout the country.



Specially chartered 747 arrives at KLIA

A specially chartered MAS Boeing 747, piloted by three senior MAS captains, arrived at the Bunga Raya Complex of the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) at 9.55am, taxiing to a stop in front of 20 white hearses. Officers from the army's 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade, formed a guard of honour facing the 747's nose, as the ceremony steeped in military tradition commenced.



Army 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade forming a guard of honour



Waiting hearses

Seventeen caskets and three urns, draped in the national flag, were gently lowered by a motorised platform from the belly of the 747. Six army personnel waiting below lifted the caskets onto the shoulders of an eight-pallbearer detachment of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Royal Malay Regiment in full ceremonial attire. This parade carried each casket to its own waiting hearse, led by a superior officer. The marching was slow and purposefully executed perfectly in consistent unison, for each victim's casket. The three urns were each carried by a single guard. Marching side-by-side, each urn was honoured with the same slow and purposeful stride.



Caskets of compatriots being unloaded

Relaying the dead, one soul at a time per hearse, took a good hour. Muffled sobs punctuated the silence as the pallbearers, bearing the weight of a grieving nation, carried each casket in turn, to its waiting hearse. It was an emotional lapse of time. More than 1,000 people, including MAS employees and off duty crew members came in solidarity to pay last respects to their colleagues.



A sombre march to the awaiting hearse

As the door of the last hearse was closed, the master of ceremonies then called for the nation to rise and observe a minute of silence at 10.55 am. Throughout the KLIA complex, Information Department staff held placards at strategic places, with the message “A minute of silence for MH17”. KLIA terminal, ground staff and the public, including foreigners in the departure and arrival halls, were seen either standing or sitting with their heads bowed, offering prayers and observing the minute of silence. Where possible, all airport traffic movement came to a halt.

This act was repeated across the nation. At the Komtar shopping complex in Georgetown, Penang, it was a sea of black as Penang folk gathered at the foyer, a number carrying posters with the words “Pray for MH17”. Traffic at the Penang Bridge toll plaza and on the new 24km long Sultan Abdul Halim Mu’adzam Bridge came to halt, with motorists stopping their vehicles to observe a minute of silence. Similar events occurred across the nation.



Loading caskets into hearses

Following the minute’s silence of observance, the convoy of hearses then drove past the rows of bereaved families and dignitaries, who received a silent salute from the co-drivers of the hearses.

Accompanied by military police outriders, 13 hearses processed to the Malaysia Airports Training Centre, where they were joined by the next of kin before heading by road to their respective hometowns.



Convoy of hearses passes bereaved & dignitaries express their grief

The remains of seven of the victims were ferried by hearse to two Royal Malaysian Air Force Hercules C130s and three EC725 helicopters at 11.30 am for transport to regional areas of Malaysia. An impressive occurrence observed was the orchestrated simultaneous start-up of these aircraft and the reverence of the soft take-offs of the C130s and the EC725s to the location of the final resting places of their compatriots. I am sure the pilots and crew of these aircraft must have felt emotions of national loss and sadness, as well as grief at the loss of professional colleagues among the pilot and crew ranks. The first officer and a stewardess of MH17 were among the returned victims.

The national wound of loss and grieving in Malaysia, was opened by the shock of the mysterious disappearance of Malaysian Airlines MH 370 on 8 March when 227 passengers and 12 crew members were lost. That wound has been kept raw with this latest aviation disaster to hit the nation. “This is a historic moment for all Malaysians, who are united in expressing their sadness and grief for victims and their families”, Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said.



MH17 victim bodies being loaded into an EC725 helicopter

I felt privileged to be in Malaysia at the time of this significant and exceptional ceremony for the Malaysian people. Witnessing the event live on local television provided an insight which perhaps was not accessible to this degree in Australia. The event will remain fixed in my mind.

