

THE DEAD DID EXIST – Why the boat people monuments in Galang Indonesia and Bidong Malaysia must be preserved

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A woman arranged for her and her three children to escape Vietnam by boat after visiting her husband at the concentration camp. Discreetly, he told her: "I have no chance of return. You and the children, please try to get out of the country." The mother and her three children never reached the shore. They drowned somewhere between the Vietnam sea and the Indonesian islands. Now, the father, currently living in America, is constantly tormented by the gnawing question – Am I responsible for all this? Another mother buried her husband after his failed suicide attempt in the concentration camp. He was seriously ill after that and was allowed to be brought home to die. She wanted the children to escape because they belonged to the tainted class, they would not be allowed to go to university, they would not be able to get a government job, in a country where the private business sector was outlawed. The couple had two sons and four daughters, the eldest volunteered to embark on the dangerous journey first, he was sixteen. One month later, the news came. The young boy and all his companions had vanished at sea. The remaining members of the family settle in America; the presence of the deceased, father and son, one old one young, is always felt, on the family altar. I have personal knowledge about these stories, because all the people involved are my relatives.

I know a man who was part of an escape ring; because they had the assistance of the communist cadres who took bribe in gold taels, these escapes were termed "semi-official escapes". After helping many to escape successfully, he eventually decided for the whole family to leave. The group procured a big boat, with ample supply of food, water, medicine and even weapons for self-defence. The boat capsized in Philippines, it tipped over when people all rushed to one side. His wife and all his children died; he survived, a walking ghost, for deep down in his heart, he had also died. I often see him but never dare to bring up this tragedy.

We, the refugees who survived, all have relatives, or someone we know, vanished in the South sea. Many boats capsized, many other drifted aimlessly until food and water ran out. How many died of hunger, of thirst, or found themselves lost somewhere in the myriad of archipelagos in the vast ocean? How many were slaughtered by pirates?

In the former refugee camps of Bidong Malaysia and Galang Indonesia, the cemeteries where hundreds of refugees were buried are still there. Mass graves were dug for hundreds of bodies all from the same boat, their drifting wreckage was pulled to shore but everyone in it had long ago drawn their last breath. For hygienic reason, no one searched through the cadavers to at least identify them and get their name engraved on the tombstone. These unnamed deceased, despite the makeshift burial on the islands, were lucky because they, at least, were allowed a resting place. Hundreds of thousands others lost their life in the South sea, they died in pain, in despair, in wretchedness, unknown, without a grave. In their dying moment, they still tried to look up the sky for God, for Buddha, they still tried to say their prayers, unfalteringly, to Quan-Yin, to the Virgin Mary. They died without a decent burial. The ocean was a gigantic mass grave for them.

The monuments in Galang Indonesia and Bidong Malaysia are also the mass entombments for half a million to one million boat people who perished at sea. Religious leaders of various religions have returned to those islands to pray for the soul of the dead. On these islands, among hundreds of burial sites with tombstones and hundreds others without the dignity of a tombstone, stood these newly erected monuments as tombstones for whom only a sea burial had been arranged by the ocean. They came from the provinces of Ha Tien, Vung Tau, Nha Trang from South Vietnam or Thanh Hoa, Mong Cai from North Vietnam, the freedom seeking boat people who never reached the shore of freedom.

Mass tombstones were erected around the world for the Jewish people victims of the Holocaust. There are monuments for Armenians who were massacred in World War I. There are monuments commemorating Vietnamese boat people in major cities around

the world. But, for the Vietnamese, no place holds such significance as the Malaysian and Indonesian islands where, thanks to the kindheartedness of the local people, millions of refugees were rescued and allowed to stay in those temporary havens. Many died there, many were also born there. These places will be forever engraved in the history of mankind as a powerful testament to the force of humanity, where the innocent victims of a most cruel tyranny finally were offered solace in the caring hands of the world community.

Like all of us, these people were once our companions in the common human quest for freedom, for human decency. Unlike all of us, they were unlucky. We cannot forget them, we cannot forsake them for the second time to oblivion, we cannot let them become just a number, a statistic in the pages of history. For these deceased boat people did exist.