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PRESS RELEASE

12 JUNE 2019

NEED TO TACKLE ROOT CAUSES OF ORANG ASLI HEALTH WOES

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) is extremely saddened to learn about the deaths and ill health of the Bateq community members in Kampung Koh, Gua Musang, Kelantan. It is indeed shocking that days have gone by and the government authorities have yet to ascertain the actual cause of the deaths and the deterioration of health among the Bateq community.

While we welcome the emergency meeting called on by the Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Wan Azizah in giving special attention to the issue and in expressing the need for comprehensive action, SAM is of the view that it is not enough to just tackle the immediate health issues plaguing this Orang Asli community but there is urgent need to address the root causes that have led to the deterioration of their health.

A comprehensive response requires the Federal and State authorities to recognise the vulnerabilities faced by the indigenous communities as a result of the destruction of their land and the pollution of their natural resources and their surrounding environment, including their water resources.

The health woes of indigenous communities are not unique to the Bateq community alone. SAM has long documented incidences of poor health among indigenous peoples since the 1980s and in recent years. Through our ground work, we have regularly encountered the valid suspicions raised by indigenous communities in Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak, that many of their illnesses are caused by environmental destruction and pollution. These can range from fever, stomach and digestive problems, diarrhoea, vomiting, horrible skin and eye infections to malaria. This we have seen in especially the nomadic tribes, such as the Penan community in the Baram in Sarawak.

In addition, the deprivation and non-recognition of their native rights to lands and natural resources in order to make way for companies involved in logging, plantations, mining companies and other interests have indeed led to poverty, malnourishment, poor health and psychological distress, rendering them highly vulnerable death and disease.

These problems are indeed preventable, if only States recognise the native rights and customs of indigenous peoples to their land and natural resources. Indeed, the States have a fiduciary duty to protect the rights of indigenous communities, as affirmed by our Federal Constitution and several judicial decisions.

In addition, there has been a failure on the part of our authorities in delivering basic services to our rural indigenous communities, from a clean water and electricity supply, good sanitation, transportation and education infrastructure and quality healthcare services.

Throughout the years, countless letters and memoranda have been sent to all the relevant Federal and State authorities to repeat litany of problems facing the indigenous communities in the country.

Many of our concerns have been captured in the 136 resolutions produced by the National Orang Asli Convention in April 2019. Further, the Report of the National Inquiry into the Land Rights of Indigenous Peoples published by SUHAKAM in 2013 is a key national reference, describing the systemic nature of the violations of the indigenous customary land rights in Malaysia and their impacts. Unfortunately, its 18 recommendations, have yet to be implemented.

We therefore urge our Federal and State authorities that are responsible for indigenous peoples, land, forests, water, natural resources, the environment, healthcare, rural services, education, transportation, primary industries and the law, to work together with indigenous, legal and civil society communities, to fully grasp the root cause of this tragedy, in order to establish the correct policy and legal reforms to protect the rights and welfare of our indigenous peoples.

Similarly, the Parliament must also establish a body to address the protection of the rights of Malaysia's indigenous peoples.

Unless the government recognises the systemic roots of the problems of our indigenous communities, the correct institutional solutions will continue to evade us.

If this continues, then the tragedy befalling the Bateq community may simply repeat itself.

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President
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