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Press Release

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**Orang Asli Development Blueprint must recognise their customary land rights**

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) supports the New Straits Times editorial published on April 24, 2019, titled, NST Leader: “A meaningful future for the community.”

The editorial was written in conjunction with the recently held 2019 Orang Asli Convention, where the Prime Minister announced the plan to develop a National Orang Asli Development Blueprint.

SAM welcomes the announcement of the blueprint and shares the view that such a national plan is long overdue.

The editorial raises at least three important points that must be taken into account in order to ensure that the blueprint will meaningfully serve its purpose.

First, the development of the blueprint requires comprehensive consultations with the Orang Asli community themselves.

Second, it must envision development which complements the lives and culture of the community and does not harm the cultural norms that they wish to maintain. The Orang Asli community must no longer be labelled as anti-development just because they oppose the destruction of their customary forests, which threatens their way of life.

Third, a balanced development must recognise the centrality of protecting the Orang Asli customary land rights.

The Orang Asli community clearly know what is best for them, for they are the last remaining guardians of our forests. Today, they continue to sustainably utilise the forests and other natural resources in ways that modern society has even not fully comprehended.

Consequently, the blueprint must not ignore the importance of integrating the protection of the Orang Asli customary land rights within the governance of our forests, natural resources and environment.

As a Party to the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ (UNDRIP) the government must recognise as stated in the Declaration, “the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources.”

The blueprint must therefore take into account the various provisions of the UNDRIP and give effect to them, so that the rights of all indigenous peoples, including the Orang Asli, are fully recognised, protected and realised through the actual implementation of the right policies and laws.

In addition, the blueprint must also take into account the 18 recommendations made by SUHAKAM's Report on the 'National Inquiry into the Land Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2013.' The first of these is the need to recognise the indigenous customary rights to land, by addressing the security of tenure of such rights, ensuring that the various concepts on customary tenure is clarified within our governance system and by providing restitution for the non-recognition of customary land in the past. The final recommendation calls for the establishment of an independent national commission on indigenous peoples.

If the blueprint is able to incorporate these concerns, then the possibility of a meaningful future for the Orang Asli community may finally materialize.

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