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Media Statement

25 March 2022

Fulfill PeSAWAH's demands to ensure our food sovereignty

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) and Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) urge the Malaysian Government to fulfill the demands of Pertubuhan Persaudaraan Pesawah Malaysia (PeSAWAH) who submitted a memorandum to six members of parliament from various political parties, both government and opposition on 17th March 2022. The memorandum outlined the problems faced by paddy farmers and included 14 recommendations to resolve their problems.

An important issue raised by PeSAWAH is the Agriculture Department's attempt to amend the Protection of New Plant Varieties Act 2004 to be in line with the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) Convention 1991. UPOV 1991 aims to strengthen the corporate monopoly of seeds, whereas the existing Protection of New Plant Varieties Act 2004 is sufficient as it balances the rights of the company and the traditional rights of the farmers. To comply with UPOV 1991 will in fact not be an amendment of the existing Act but a fundamental change.

Studies have shown that UPOV 1991 will impact farmers that rely on farmer-seed management systems and their traditional practice of saving, re-using, exchanging, and selling of their saved seeds. In addition, the Department of Agriculture is also drafting a Seed Quality Bill that will require every individual (farmer or non-farmer) to apply for a license to process seeds that are categorized as "controlled seeds".

Another major issue that is raised by PeSAWAH is the proposal to take over the paddy and rice industry in stages through the Large-Scale Smart Paddy Field (Smart SBB) project. PeSAWAH is concerned that the paddy estates that will be established will create a corporate monopoly in the paddy and rice sector. This development is very worrying as paddy is a matter of food security and thus guarantees our national security.

PeSAWAH fears that small farmers will be lured with sweet promises to induce them to join the paddy estate scheme. In reality, farmers may lose their autonomy and lands whilst the proponent will benefit from existing government subsidies and monopoly on the seed market, fertilizers, pesticides, and machinery that will be handed over to companies to manage.

According to PeSAWAH, the Smart SBB project is expected to marginalise young farmers and small local companies that are committed to work on idle paddy fields; and there will be many risks including lands being mortgaged due to contravention of the terms and conditions of the agreements, even if unwittingly; existing operators of tractors and machinery losing customers; entry of cheaper foreign labour; and paddy fields becoming infertile from widespread pesticide contamination and depletion of soil nutrients or land use being converted to other projects.

The issues and problems raised by PeSAWAH clearly indicate that the voice and welfare of paddy farmers and small farmers generally have not been seriously considered. On the other hand, corporations are being prioritised in government policies. The fact is industrial agriculture and UPOV 1991 will deplete

the rights of farmers to their cultivated land and seeds. Land and seeds are essential for farmers. The government must recognise that small farmers play a big role in supplying our staple food and thus our nation's food security.

In view of this, CAP and SAM urge the government to seriously take heed of the memorandum and recommendations by PeSAWAH. Among the recommendations are to abolish the SMART SBB project, and instead support and empower small farmers and entrepreneurs. Besides this PeSAWAH calls on the government to cancel plans to join UPOV 1991 and stop the enactment of the Seed Quality Bill.

At a time when the world is facing a crisis of food supply in the advent of climate change, wars, and pandemics such as the Covid19, it is vital for the government to guarantee our food sovereignty and support small farmers. Listen to PeSAWAH and fulfill their demands.

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