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For Environmental Justice

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Media Statement

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**ENCROACHMENT AND ILLEGAL CLEARING IN
BUKIT MERAH LAKE RESERVE, KERIAN DISTRICT, PERAK**

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) and environmental groups comprising of CAP, KUASA, PEKA and GRASS urge the relevant authorities to take action against anyone found to encroach and illegally clear the forests in the Bukit Merah Lake Reserve in the district of Kerian, Perak.

Fifteen years ago, SAM had found that a portion of the Bukit Merah Lake Reserve had been encroached and illegally converted for cultivation of oil palm. Presently the situation here is getting worse.

The illegal clearing and encroachment of the Bukit Merah Lake Reserve bring about environmental impacts that may lead to the decline in water level in the Bukit Merah Lake which will subsequently affect the granary area in Kerian District, Perak and south of Seberang Perai, Penang covering about 24,000 hectares of paddy fields.

In fact the water supply from the Bukit Merah Lake is also used for industry and domestic purpose for 200,000 users in Kerian District, part of Larut Matang and Selama, Perak. CAP had previously highlighted pilfering of water from irrigation canals and opposed the use of water from the lake for the controversial arowana breeding ventures which saw conversion of paddy fields in Kerian District.

The Bukit Merah Lake Reserve is not only important as source of water but also plays a role in flood control because a large portion of the reserve is wetland and lowland that are floodplains.

In November 2011, media statements were issued by the concerned authorities to clarify the issues that were highlighted by SAM. There were conflicting statements by the Kerian District Officer and the Kerian District Engineer of the Department of Irrigation and Drainage (DID).

According to the Kerian District Officer quoted in Adu@metro in Harian Metro dated 29 November 2011, the State Government through the Kerian District and Land Office will implement Rancangan Tanah Berkelompok (RTB) project in Pondok Tanjung nearby the Bukit Merah Lake.

On the other hand the Kerian DID District Engineer stated that the department has never supported nor given approval for any development in the Bukit Merah Lake Reserve to ensure the Bukit Merah Lake ecosystem is protected and its functions are not impaired. Moreover the DID clarified that the department has no authority to prevent any encroachment or illegal clearing although the department is responsible for the lake and river maintenance and operation.

Based on the sheet plan produced by the Department of Survey and Mapping Malaysia: No 377; - (GN 3319 of 1914, GN 1453 of 1919 and GN 8279 of 1929 excision), this area is gazetted as the Bukit Merah Lake Reserve.

In fact according to the Kerian District Local Plan, the area is part of a water catchment area.

The exploitation of the Bukit Merah Lake Reserve clearly does not comply with the Guidelines on Planning, Conservation and Development in Environmentally Sensitive Areas prepared by the Town and Country Planning Department (refer to GP007-A(2) – Flood Plains, Wetlands, Ex-Mines, Lakes and River and GP007-A(3) – Water Catchment and Groundwater Source).

The exploitation and destruction of the Bukit Merah Lake Reserve (conversion from forest and terrestrial natural areas to other land use) clearly exposes the soil surface to run-offs during heavy rain. This will cause siltation, sedimentation at the bottom of the Bukit Merah Lake.

Hence we hope that the relevant authorities enforce the law related to unlawful occupation of State land and reserved land as stipulated in Section 425 of the National Land Code, 1965.

The relevant authorities, both in the district and state level must refer and comply existing policies and physical plans when implementing any development, in particular those involving land-use conversion.

In the interest of environmental protection and security of water supply, we urge an immediate stop of the exploitation and land conversion in the Bukit Merah Lake Reserve. The devastated areas should be rehabilitated with planting of suitable species of forest trees.

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Presiden
Sahabat Alam Malaysia

Note to editor: Today's activity on World Environment Day (5 Jun 2016) is participated by Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), Persatuan Aktivis Sahabat Alam (KUASA), Pertubuhan Pelindung Khazanah Alam Malaysia (PEKA), and Pertubuhan Alam Sekitar Sejahtera Malaysia (GRASS).