

Indigenous residents' associations in Sarawak urge the government to resolve the problems faced by rural communities

On November 28, 2023, we, the representatives of nine residents' associations of villages in Marudi, Baram Tengah, Bakong and Niah attended a meeting organised by Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) in Marudi to discuss several development issues faced by the residents of our villages.

As a result of this meeting, today, in conjunction with the celebration of the Human Rights Day 2023, a memorandum will be sent to the Sarawak state government and the federal government. Below are some of the issues that are highlighted in the memorandum.

First, encroachments on our native customary rights land (NCR) are still prevalent today. In Baram, oil palm plantations have continued to be developed on our ancestral territories that we have inherited from our forefathers without consultations and consent. This has practically destroyed our forests and farms, including the diverse species of our crops. Consequently, our sources of income, traditional medicines and cultural practices have all been badly impacted by such a development, which is extremely cruel and vicious.

Second, as a result of these widespread plantation projects and additionally, climate change, the frequency of flooding incidents has increased sharply in rural Sarawak, including in Long Bemang in Sungai Apoh and Long Panai in Sungai Tutoh.

Third, we also would like to urge the state government to reform the manner in which village heads are appointed. The current system today does not have sufficient openness, transparency and accountability. This has caused many internal conflicts and allegations of nepotism, political meddling and sometimes, corruption. By right, as per our original traditions, village heads must be elected through an open consensus process and should be selected based on their merit, and not through appointments set by the state. Consequently, the current system now has severely affected the quality of administration and the provision of essential services to the people.

Fourth, the memorandum also highlighted the fact that to this very day, our communities are still unable to access various basic services that are accessible to those who live in the cities.

Today, the network of land transportation systems for those living in the rural areas is still poorly maintained, making it a challenge for us to access other basic services, from education to healthcare. Without good access roads, it has been very difficult for rural communities to improve their socio-economic conditions. Further, our villages have also not received full coverage in respect of water supply, electricity and telecommunication services.

During the dry seasons, we would have to depend on water tanks with a limited capacity of 4,000 liters. These tanks would certainly be inadequate for a family if the drought continues for two or three weeks. Further, we also would have to spend a lot of money on electricity supply by using our own generators. During emergency and natural disasters, the absence of a reliable telecommunication system can even cause the loss of lives. For youths and entrepreneurs, the lack of internet services in the rural areas has also affected their education and business opportunities.

We are saddened by our situation in the rural areas which has become more challenging with each passing day. After more than 60 years since the birth of Malaysia, our land tenure security is still lacking. Leadership processes in our villages have been badly affected due to a flawed appointment system employed by the state. We still have not been able to receive the most basic of public services.

Considering all of the above, we urge the Sarawak state government and the federal government to take our grievances seriously and work towards resolving all the issues that we have highlighted in the memorandum.

Representatives of the residents associations:

1. Lajen Anyi (Kampung Long Tepen Residents' Association, Pelutan, Baram)
2. Peter Anak Tom (Sungai Buri Residents' Association)
3. Bangga Anak Kerdit (Rh.LachianakBikang, Residents' Association, Sebatuk Baru, Suai, Niah)
4. Roseta Anak Mawa (Logan Entasan Residents' Association, Marudi)
5. Rubin Alah (Long Pilah Residents' Association, Telang Usan, Miri)
6. Saging Ngau (Long Miri Residents' Association, Baram, Sarawak)
7. Robertson Belayong (Rumah Labang Residents' Association, Nanga SeridanTinjarBeluru, Miri)
8. Peter Abung (Kampung Long Lunyim Residents' Association, Sungai Pelutan)
9. Ubin Anak Telajan (Iban Marudi Residents' Association, Baram)