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Kampung Gelam landslide a tragedy that was waiting to happen

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THE loss of 17 lives in a landslide on Sunday in Kampung Gelam, Sandakan could have been avoided if the squatters had complied with the State Government's directive to vacate the area several years ago.

The Sandakan Municipal Council issued eviction orders last year to about 30 families who had established a squatter colony with houses sandwiched between two hills several years ago.

Social Services Minister Datuk Raymond Tan Shu Kiah said several attempts to demolish the houses were met with protests from the villagers, who were mostly foreigners.

"Children and old people were made to stay inside their houses to prevent the demolition exercises."

Nine days of continuous rain was the main cause of the sudden movement of earth from the top of both hills, burying four houses about 4am on Sunday.

The 17 killed were sleeping when water washed down tonnes of mud, boulders and uprooted trees, crushing their houses. Three families were almost wiped out.

In a similar incident three years ago in Taman Poh Heng, Batu Sapi, not far from Kampung Gelam, five people were killed when a landslide hit their houses after several days of downpour.

Tan, the assemblyman for Tanjung Papat, one of the two State constituencies in Sandakan, said Kampung Gelam was not one of the 17 landslide-prone areas identified by the State Natural Disaster Committee.

Though the affected residents are mostly foreigners but staying in the State with valid travel documents, every effort is being made to render assistance to them.

Squatting in Kampung Gelam has been convenient for the residents who are mostly hawkers operating in several markets within the Sandakan municipality.

To prevent another recurrence, Chief Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, who has toured the village, has directed the municipal council to demolish all the remaining squatter houses.

He said this latest order to evict the remaining squatters was to avoid a similar disaster due to the unpredictable weather in the east coast.

"We (the Government) are in the process of studying the locations of squatter colonies throughout the State in the interest of public safety," he said.

Dompok said the Sunday incident should be a reminder to those squatting in areas such as river banks and hill slopes to heed the Government's call to move out.

With the disaster fresh on their minds, the people may be willing to heed such advice - but for how long?

The Kampung Gelam incident brings to mind another disaster in December 1996 which killed about 300 people, the majority of them foreigners, including illegal immigrants, living along several rivers in Keningau.

In the incident, tropical typhoon "Greg" brought heavy rains resulting in a flood which brought down tonnes of mud and uprooted trees wiping out squatter houses on the river banks.

Following the Keningau incident, the Government ordered that no new structures be allowed on river banks. Survivors were also not allowed to rebuild houses at the same spot.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who toured Keningau in the aftermath of "Greg", also directed all State Governments to check and take action to deter people from residing on river banks.

But in the same areas now, the survivors plus newcomers have rapidly established new squatter colonies.

The same will happen in Kampung Gelam if the authorities, particularly the Sandakan Municipal Council, is not firm in its action to declare the area "out of bounds" for human habitation.

Datuk Ampong Puyun, a respected leader in Sandakan, said there were several areas within the municipality and surrounding areas suitable for the re-settlement of squatters.

He believes the municipal council would be able to conduct its survey of suitable areas for relocation so that those squatting on every available open area in the municipality could be moved out.

Those involved in the search and rescue operations in Kampung Gelam deserve to be commended for their swift, orderly and efficient work.

A team headed by Sandakan police chief Assistant Commissioner Hashim Mohd Yusof was at the scene minutes after being informed of the incident about 6am.

They managed to pull out the first victim at 7.30am and the 17th at 6.50pm.

Sabah police chief Datuk Mamat Talib said "a big thank you" must also be extended to the more than 100 officers and men involved in making the operations a success.

Apart from the police, the others involved in the operations were personnel from the Fire and Rescue Department, General Operations Force, the military, Sandakan Municipal Council, Rela, Public Works Department, Duchess of Kent Hospital, the Malaysian Red Crescent Society and the public.

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