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Orang Asli enter the mainstream

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WHEN the Bukit Lanjan Orang Asli enter the mainstream tomorrow, they need not fear being like a tribe cast adrift in an unmerciful desert. For they have many friends.

First and foremost is the Orang Asli Affairs Department (JHEOA), whose function and existence is that as a "protector of the Orang Asli from womb to tomb," as its director-general Md Rosnan Sulaiman puts it.

"The job of the department is to facilitate the development of the Orang Asli. In the old days, when this country and the Orang Asli were not so developed, 'development' meant physical development.

"But now things are changing. Now we need to supplement the physical development with mental development," he said.

Because of the rapid change in the surroundings and lifestyle of some of the urban Orang Asli, it fell on the department to ensure that there was an attitudinal change as well.

"As development encroaches upon them, it is inevitable that they will have to come out. They have to be involved in development.

"It is, therefore, the department's duty to make sure that they are 'well-cushioned'," said Rosnan.

Which is why the department is constantly planning and implementing educational programmes like skills training for the Orang Asli, which will be funded by the RM7,924,060 trust fund provided by the developer for the education of the Bukit Lanjan Orang Asli children.

"There is never an instance of leaving them as they are. We need to bring the Orang Asli out into the mainstream of society. The Orang Asli are citizens of Malaysia, and as such, should enjoy the full benefits that all citizens enjoy.

"At the same time, they should also shoulder the responsibility that all citizens do, namely by paying their taxes and voting," he added.

The Bukit Lanjan project is an important test-bed, and one which the department will be watching closely, as it could determine the way in which other Orang Asli development goes.

Even so, Rosnan said, the 'privatisation' of Orang Asli development was not the department's target.

And, even as the Orang Asli of Bukit Lanjan eagerly await tomorrow, when they will receive their house keys from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, he said: "It's work-as-usual as far as the department is concerned."

For another friend of the Orang Asli, Datuk Anthony Ratos, the event is even more significant.

A friend of the Orang Asli for 57 years, Ratos, 69, was the assistant director in the Orang Asli Department for six years in the 1960s.

Yet through the years, his involvement with all things Orang Asli has not faded. A large part of his life and passion is taken up by the Orang Asli, and he does not begrudge them it.

He has waited a long time for a decent bit of development for his friends, and at last it has arrived - for the Orang Asli of Bukit Lanjan, at least.

Though long an advocate of Orang Asli development within their natural environment, Ratos concedes that this is just not possible for urban Orang Asli like those at Bukit Lanjan, who have for years lived at the very fringe of civilisation.

Since it is impossible to keep them in their natural environment forever, then it is the society's duty to assist them into the mainstream.

Ratos felt that, done right, the Orang Asli could be given the opportunity to develop as well as the Malays have developed in the last 50 or 60 years.

One or two generations down the line, the Orang Asli may not necessarily all be found in the jungle, but this would not change their identity as a people.

Much like any other ethnic group, no matter where they are, the Orang Asli would still hold by their language, culture, symbolisms, and beliefs. And, much like the modern Malays of today would "balik kampung", the modern Orang Asli, too, would go back to the place of his ancestors.

Ratos concedes that the job of the JHEOA has not been an easy one.

The limited number of personnel (1,300 staff to 116,000 Orang Asli nationwide) is insufficient for the department to truly keep alert to the needs of the Orang Asli.

Ideally, Ratos said, there should be enough staff at the ground level who are assimilated into the Orang Asli culture.

Despite all the shortcomings, Ratos does feel that through the resettlement package, the Government has shown the world that the Orang Asli are as important as any of its other citizens.

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